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Campbell's Chicken Noodle Soup™ and Saltine Crackers: A Milpero's Autoethnographic Study of Struggle and Success in Life and in Education

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CAMPBELL'S™ CHICKEN NOODLE SOUP AND SALTINE CRACKERS: A *MILPERO'S* AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF STRUGGLE AND SUCCESS IN LIFE AND IN EDUCATION

A Dissertation

by

ERNESTO CANTU

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ABSTRACT

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The state of Texas has close to 3,000 *colonias*, with most of them found along the Texas/Mexico border ("Colonias in Texas," n.d.) and the most citizens of any state living in *colonias*. I grew up in a *colonia* in South Texas called *Las Milpas*, located in Pharr, Texas. *Colonia* children are often stigmatized and marginalized. This autoethnographic study is a look into my life as an educator and the social and cultural factors that have contributed to my survival and success. As a child, I lost both my mother and father. I was fortunate that my oldest sister, Margarita "Margie" Garcia, raised me.

Through the use of personal narratives as data, I explored events that have had a significant effect on my own and professional lives. These events have shaped my axiology, what I value, and my ontology, who I am as a person- my state of being. The experiences range from professional to personal, but all have influenced my life as an educator as I worked in the service of others, especially children. Relationships, community, and mentorship have equipped me with the skills and experiences to draw upon as I make decisions that impact children and staff.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this autoethnography to my beautiful wife of twenty-six years, Cynthia Cantu. I would not be where I am without your love, support, and push. To my wonderful children, Alyssa, Klarissa, and Ernesto "Little Ernie," thank you for your words of encouragement and pride. I love you, and I am so proud of each one of you. I would also like to dedicate this work to my number one girl, my granddaughter Galileah May Rodriguez- grandpa loves you mama.

I would also like to dedicate this autoethnography to my sister Margie, and my brothers, Hector, Edmundo, and Heliodoro. Thank you all for looking out for me when I was growing up. To my wonderful sister, Dora that passed away several years ago- I love and miss you.

Lastly, to all the children growing up in *colonias*, especially the ones in my previous school IDEA Pharr College Prep and in my beloved *colonia Las Milpas,* I dedicate this autoethnography to you. You continue to inspire me. Keep proving everyone wrong! ¡*Arriba Las Milpas!*

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I would like to thank my long-time mentor and guide, and co-chair, Dr. Francisco Guajardo, for his steadfast belief not only in me but in children like me. Thank you for pushing my thinking and actions. I could not be here without your help and support. Dr. Velma Menchaca, thank you for jumping into co-chair my dissertation committee and for always looking out for me. You have really gone above and beyond for me. I hope to one day repay that kindness and dedication by helping others. To Dr. Federico Guerra and Dr. Alejandro Garcia, thank you also for agreeing to join my committee and for the feedback and suggestions you have provided.

I could not have completed this work without the help of a good friend, mentor, and professional colleague, Dr. Virginia Richter. Your editing skills and sustained push have helped me cross the finish line. I could not have done it without you.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Campbell's™ Soup and Saltine Crackers

The frail, little boy looked around the crowded room, a wall of white lab coats restricting his view. His father, brother, and sister were in the room. He was looking, but not seeing; he was listening, but not hearing. While his four-year-old mind tried to comprehend the enormity of it all, his heart knew. The connection that magically materializes between the youngest child and his mother had been severed. He remembered seeing his mother slumped over her chair while eating chicken noodle soup, her mouth full of soup and saltine crackers. He vividly remembered the red can with the fancy letters resting on the kitchen counter. For years, any time he saw that familiar can of Campbell's™ Chicken Noodle Soup, he would be tragically transported to that fateful December day. His life would be changed forever from that day on.

His mother was dead.

I am that four-year-old boy. I remember vividly that day that my mother passed away. It sometimes feels like I live that day over and over and that my life is spiraling out of control because of it. It's strange how one day can shape the rest of your life. I firmly believe that throughout our lives, there are instances in which the choice we make or the event that unfolds will have far-reaching ramifications; our lives could have been or would have been different if

not for that decision or event. This work is an attempt at portraying the social, cultural, and political forces that shaped a young Latino in a local Texas colonia and the resilient person that I am.

I have been blessed and cursed with a spectacular memory.

I am more than a number. My life and experience cannot be summed up by numbers on a page. However, historically, most research and researchers would categorize my life into succinct, neat piles of numbers that fail to tell my true story (Ellis, 2013). While numbers may give a semblance of insight into what I have or have not accomplished, they neglect to chronicle the trials, challenges, and successes that my story may offer. Positivist thought states that for research to be "real," it must be measured and quantified (Wall, 2006).

In a positivist world, all data is orderly and quantifiable and must be gathered and analyzed by objective measures. Natural scientists are aghast at possibly generating a question or study that they do not already have an algorithm or technique available to produce an answer (Aronowitz & Ausch, 2000). In this age of accountability, if it cannot be counted, it does not matter or has little or no importance. Aronowitz and Ausch (2000) state that, according to Popperian, science is to be seen and measured. I argue that we live in and partake of the cult of measurement (Padilla, 2005) that has infiltrated all aspects of education and academia.

My epistemology, however, does not fit neatly into these confines because my life experiences have shaped it and forced it to expand in a more dynamic, organic fashion. Popular research states that for my life experiences to contribute to the body of knowledge, they must be quantifiable and measurable; however, while risk factors and actions can be counted, measured, and analyzed, my thoughts, feelings, and experiences cannot be measured, but they can be

analyzed. Just like my life has been the of the self. I realized that reflecting and studying my story could be used for helping, not only others like myself, but most importantly, me.

Critical self-reflection is vital in the formation of one's ontology. I, as a person, did not just happen. Just like I did not suddenly exist, neither did my axiology, my values, or my personal being- my ontology. My whole life has shaped me into who I have become. Pizarro (2012) states that our ontologies are not only shaped by where we live but also and, in my opinion, most importantly, in the manner we live. My life has shaped me into the person that I have become. For that reason, studying my life is important and will contribute to the body of knowledge. I know now that critical self-reflection and ontology are intertwined- you cannot have one without the other.

My research is an autoethnographic exploration into my life, about growing up in a colonia, having a dream, and realizing that dream. As an educator, I have dedicated my professional and personal life to not only preparing my students for success in school but also in life. Stories or "cuentos" play an essential role in education. When educators link, share, and listen to personal experiences, we can set a foundation for a profound understanding of our own lives and into the lives of our students (Gonzalez & Padilla, 2008). The context of this autoethnography is a look into how my personal experiences have shaped who I am and what service I do for others. Most empirical studies focus on why students are not successful and what they are missing to generalize and provide possible solutions (García & Guerra, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999; Valencia, Valenzuela, Sloan, & Foley, 2001). I believe that we should focus on the strengths we bring to the table and capitalize on those skills as a means of preventing or improving, not only ourselves but those that we serve.

Autoethnography as a research tool can be more than informative; it can be transformative as well. Narrative inquiry can help develop a deeper understanding of the self and its relation and impact on its surrounding environment. Bochner (2012) argues that when writing narrative inquiry, researchers must see themselves as more than reporters, but as writers or communicators. For educational leaders, this deeper understanding can foster a direct connection between personal experiences and what is considered an informed approach to curriculum and pedagogy (Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012). Wagner (1990) states that ethnographic research attempts to, "develop an understanding of how a group of people live and work together, the meanings those people either construct or perceive in the activities they share, and the practices through which they affirm, refine or give life to such meaning" (p. 196).

This study is a move away from the traditional, canonical approach to research and research methodology (Hermann, 2012). This alternative, subjective, self-reflective, emotional approach to research uses storytelling and narratives to connect the sciences with humanities (Bochner, 2012). This type of study provides a look into the forces that shape a person or community as a means of creating self-awareness, self-reflectiveness, and self-action by building reflective and introspective practices. Autoethnography goes beyond merely telling a story; instead, it invites the reader into the content by showing how an in-depth analysis of personal experiences is a useful research and academic tool that gives voice to personal experiences. This voice, tied to personal and professional understanding, advances sociological practices (Wall, 2008, p. 39). Bochner (2012) explains that "autoethnographies are not intended to be received, but rather to be encountered, conversed with and appreciated" (p. 161). This qualitative approach aims to connect with people on the level of human meaning (Wall, 2006) that will lead to the

development of a more profound sense of understanding than the mechanics and rigidity of a quantitative approach can achieve.

In educational leadership, autoethnography clarifies the purpose, question, problem, context, or issue being addressed by utilizing the self as a central foundation for inquiry (Hughes et al., 2012); it goes beyond mere storytelling. This process involves a deeper analysis of events and their contributions to personal development and the establishment of profound consciousness. Autoethnography moves away from the traditional approach to empirical study and inquiry, and through what Bochner (2012) terms the first-person narrative, provides speech to an otherwise speechless world.

Statement of the Problem

I grew up in a *colonia* in South Texas called *Las Milpas*, located in Pharr, Texas. Most of the kids growing up in this *colonia* were called *Milperos*. Living in a *colonia* exposes residents to challenging conditions daily. Unpaved streets, lack of indoor plumbing, the absence of adequate public utilities and recreational areas are obstacles that *colonia* children must overcome. The state of Texas has close to 3,000 *colonias*, with most of them found along the Texas/Mexico border ("Colonias in Texas," n.d.). Texas has the most significant number of *colonia*s and the largest number of citizens living in *colonia*s.

The stigma of living in a *colonia* can make life difficult for school-age children and adults. Many times, children living in these poor conditions learn how to navigate a lifestyle that forces them to become adept at psychological and economic challenges (Garza, Reyes, & Trueba, 2004). Often, low-income minorities living in *colonia*s are relegated to second-class

citizen status. When I was in middle school, everyone always knew who the kids from *Las Milpas* were. Since our neighborhood streets were unpaved, all school officials had to do was look for the mud and dirt surrounding our desks. Whether by design or not, this practice serves as a delimiter in society because residence predicts educational achievement (Garza et al., 2004). Educational attainment often equates success, then low-income minority children like me still living in *colonia*s, are at a disadvantage.

This autoethnography is about growing up in a *colonia*, having a dream, and realizing that dream. To most, my dream would be more akin to a nightmare. My biggest fear growing up was that I would end up homeless and living on the streets. This fear pushed me to plan out my life at an early age. It is this aspect that comes into play, not only in my life but in the life of *colonia* children everywhere. Gonzalez and Padilla (2008) explain that autoethnography as a method of producing stories, or *cuentos*, [is] based on the assumption that linking personal experiences to cultural context …generates a deeper understanding of what it means to serve the public good. As an educator, I have dedicated my professional life to preparing my students for success in school and life. Gonzalez and Padilla's (2008) explanation fits the context of my study because it is a look into how my personal experiences have shaped who I am and what I do in service to others. In my opinion, all humility aside, my journey can serve as a blueprint for other low-income minorities that want to go to college and make a better life for themselves.

And it begins

When I was four years old, I was with my mother when she had a massive heart attack and passed away. My father soon followed her nine months later when he succumbed to cancer he had been fighting for a year. My parents left behind a small family that was unprepared to

take care of themselves or each other. However, we persevered. There have been many times in my life where giving up would have been the most natural thing for me to do. Growing up in *Las Milpas*, a *colonia* in Deep South Texas, basically an orphan, I can say that life was not always easy for me, but it was a good life. I can say that my whole life has shaped who I am and what I do.

My 18-year-old sister, Margarita, paved the way for me. My sister refused to let our family of six siblings be parceled out when my parents passed away. Instead, she took on the role of head of the family and raised all of us. I also have to say that my brother-in-law, Beto, whom my sister married soon after my parents died, also played a hand in shaping who I am. Through him, I learned to be a hard worker and to care about others. My sister and life taught me that although life is not always fair or easy, you have to keep working hard and never give up.

Growing up, I knew that I wanted to go to college, but I did not know what to do or how to get there. There was only one adult in my life, Ms. Hinojosa, my 9th-grade social studies teacher that talked to me about college, and this was about a month before I graduated from high school; I had already joined the U.S. Army by then. I signed up for the Army as a junior in high school. The recruiter did a great job of selling it to me because he said the Army had a Delayed Entry Program and would "hold" my spot for me. I imagined a long line of kids fighting over that coveted spot and that I was special because they were holding it for me. I am fond of telling people that I also earned a scholarship for college, the GI Bill. The Army offered me the GI Bill ($12,000), and because of my Armed Services Vocabulary Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) score, I received a college fund of $10,000 as well- $22,000 as an offer for my future. I was 16 years old when I decided that the U.S. Army was not only the best option for me but also the only option

for me. I left three days after my high school graduation; I was 17 years old.

I have been an educator for twenty-two years. I was a classroom teacher for eight of those years; the other fourteen I have been an administrator with a Texas public charter school system. During twelve years of those years, I have been a founding member of three expansion charter schools, one as founding principal and two, as Director of Operations; I have been a Senior VP of Schools, managing and supporting nine principals and have most recently promoted to Executive Director, responsible for launching a new region in El Paso, Texas. I have dedicated my life to ensuring that students like me, low-income minorities, have every opportunity that I have had to fight for at their disposal.

Statement of Purpose

Different forces shaped and continue to develop my personal and professional identities. My research is an autoethnographic journey of self-exploration designed to provide me, others like me, and those wanting to learn about kids like me, an insight into the journey a child from a *colonia* took to becoming an educational leader. I tell my story and what I have had to overcome to get where I want to be and where I have been.

There is power in the autoethnographic process, coupled with storytelling. Telling stories keeps our traditions alive and, more importantly, creates a dynamic link between what was, what is, and what could be. Writing helps bridge the gap between living experiences and understanding those experiences (Wall, 2008). The study and compiling of this autoethnographic piece can also be therapeutic not only to me but to anyone that reads and studies my journey (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Autoethnography allows readers to become a part of the story

by pushing them to reflect on my account and any relations or similarities to their own (Mendez, 2013).

Growing up, I had ten very close friends. Only three attended college, and only two earned post-secondary degrees. I am the only one with a graduate degree. This journey into self-study will help identify the best approaches and social factors that helped ensure success and perhaps to validate my sense of self-worth. I understand that I have fought against and sometimes operated from deep-rooted imposter syndrome.

The purpose of this study will be twofold: it will provide educators and scholars a framework to understanding low-income minority *colonia* children at a more in-depth, personal level, and it will offer a look into my life and professional journey. Even though many like me are first-generation Americans, many educators have distanced themselves, either by design or by default, from the students they serve.

In our fast-paced world, leaders do not spend much time reflecting on their practice, nor do they engage in practices that would garner them a deeper understanding of those that they serve and lead. We must focus on ourselves so that we can not only identify our strengths and weaknesses but, more importantly, so that we may create a cycle not only of self-evaluation but of self-improvement. As leaders, while we must act quickly, confidently, and decisively, it is more important that we work from a stable place of careful thought and learning practices. According to Castelli (2016), when leaders engage in critical self-reflection, it leads to motivation, renewed interest and effort, and, most importantly, improved performance. As a leader, I have, for the majority of my career, worked in and served in neighborhoods with kids that either look like me or are growing up the way I did. It is personally and professionally

important that I carefully engage in critical self-reflection so that I do not join the oppressors (Freire, 1970) and continue to operate from my core belief of serving children.

When leaders do not engage in critical self-reflection, especially those serving in low-income areas, they are in danger of being less effective than those that do focus on reflection. Critical reflection leads to improvements and to more engaged interactions with those that they serve. As educational leaders, it is easy to fall into the trap of justifying all that we do by convincing ourselves that we are doing what is best for students. When we fall into this mindset, we can justify any action, program, or approach which allows us to remove the human element from teaching and leading making it easier for educators to engage in a system of subtractive education (Valenzuela, 1999).

This dissertation is an example of how educational leaders can engage in self-reflection to improve their practice and to come to terms with who they are and why they conduct themselves the way they do, but more importantly, why they must engage in critical self-reflection. This dissertation is not just about the praxis of educational leadership; it is about the growth of the self. This autoethnography is a journey of self-discovery that informed not only my practice but also my sense of being.

I have dedicated my life to serving children because I have always wanted to ensure that kids like me do not have to go through what I went. While this is an autoethnographic study, I prefer to look at it as a call to arms. *Colonia* children deserve a better chance at life, and education and social justice are the vehicles to get them there. I know that my life journey can play a role in not only providing some guidance for them but also in enlightening me and freeing me from much of the emotional baggage that I have carried for so long. I know that my research

questions are of paramount importance to my research, as they will guide me as I explore and discover (Agee, 2009) who I am and how I became who I am. Autoethnography is a move away from the widely accepted positivist approach to research; thus, my research questions and analysis move away from positivism toward a qualitative method. While I have formulated my research questions as a guide for my journey, I know that these questions may change as I delve deeper into the research, and it is acceptable (MacIntosh, Bartunek, Bhatt, & MacLean, 2016).

I have thought long and hard about what I want to know. At the crux of this research is the question: "Why me?" Let me clarify that this "why me" reflection is not an attempt at feeling sorry for myself; instead, it is the opposite. I know that I am not the only person in the world to have lived through turmoil and uncertainty, but I know that while my journey is not complete, I have more or less come out ahead. So, what is it that makes me unique? Is it an innate trait, a drive to succeed, or just luck?

Engaging in critical self-reflection has improved not only my performance but also my ability to navigate and build strong relationships with those that work with me and those that I interact with continuously. In my personal life, I have also engaged in critical self-reflection. My biggest fear growing up, was that I would end up homeless; therefore, I devoted plenty of time to figure out how to make sure that did not happen.

These research questions are a starting point. They are by no means the endpoint. The beauty of an autoethnographic study is the constant exploration, discovery, explanation, and emancipation that the researcher lives (MacIntosh et al., 2016). Quoting Creswell, Agee (2009) states that addressing the original problem often leads to our research questions changing during the process. We develop a deeper, more robust understanding of what we have not only

uncovered but have learned. In my case, as I delve deeper into my critical self-analysis, my original research may no longer fit into my unique questions, especially as I am reviewing my personal opinions and attitudes to my findings.

Research Questions

- What are the social, cultural, and political forces that impacted and shaped me as an educator and as a person?
- To what extent does critical self-reflection play a role in the professional development and effectiveness of educational leaders?

Theoretical Framework

Autoethnography, as a qualitative research tool, provides a platform for self-reflection for the researcher and a guide for other researchers. It is a look into the forces shaping individuals and a framework from which to study their pathway or environment as a means for understanding individuals. The premise behind my approach to this is that in studying myself, I may be able to provide other educators an insight into how to reach their students. Ellis et al. (2011) write that as a method, autoethnography combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography and is an attempt to analyze events in one's life that had a profound impact on the development of the person. The research goes beyond the mere categorizing or retelling what an autobiography entails. Ellis et al. (2011) posit that "most often, autobiographers write about 'epiphanies,' remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person's life, times of existential crises that forced a person to attend to and analyze lived experience, and events after which life does not seem quite the same" (p. 275). Epiphanies also play an essential role in autoethnographies, but they are more than starting points for stories.

Epiphanies in autoethnographies are the catalyst for reflection and introspection. As an educator that grew up poor and in a *colonia,* this self-study revolving around epiphanies and personal experiences will provide a blueprint for others to follow as we strive to break this poverty cycle.

I documented, analyzed, and explained how certain events in my life shaped who I am. Since ethnographies are reports that record and explain behavior (Spindler & Spindler, 1988), I will reflect and record how my life and my response to my life have shaped who I am and who I have become. Ellis et al. (2011), in quoting Maso, explain that when researchers do ethnography, they study a culture's relational practices, shared values and beliefs, and shared experiences to help insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers) better understand the culture.

This study will be a non-linear story of my life, family members, and to some extent, the lives of some of my childhood friends. Guajardo and Guajardo (2007) assert that knowledge comes from people, their stories, their struggles, their triumphs, their pain… (p. 30) so this technique of studying not only myself but also pivotal events in my life will offer a careful analysis into the journey that I have taken to become the school and educational leader that I am today.

This study is not a tribute to my life or me. This study is a tool designed to help understand the life of a *colonia* child and the path I took to becoming the husband, father, son, brother, teacher, and leader that I am. Resilience is the ability to live through harrowing experiences and the ability to overcome, positively adapt, and to bounce back (Ledesma, 2014), and I have not done those things without the help and support of others.

There have been several instances in my life where an event could and should have derailed my trajectory. My parents died within months of each other before I was five, my experience in a combat zone, my sister's death years later, and a demotion from school principal are a few examples. While I know this does not sound humble at all, I have often told myself that I have lived through what more than likely would have broken many others. My favorite personal mantra has always been, “what can anyone do to me that life has not already tried?” While I am not saying or implying that my life can and should be a testament to others, I will argue that my life can be a testament to me. My research will be a valid study of the self and to reiterate a previous point: this process and product, while being completed to fulfill requirements for a graduate degree, will help me understand who I am. Resiliency is both biological and cultural (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014), and my upbringing has played a significant role in my development. Resilience is not binary. Instead, it is a continuum where I have, depending on the situation, undulated between opposing points and ventured or lived in different parts of the spectrum.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

Every piece of research, whether qualitative or quantitative, has limitations or arguments against either the process or the product itself. As I delved into this journey of self-analysis and self-discovery, it was vital that I expect, identify, explore, and address challenges that my research may uncover and encounter. The most pressing concerns centered around the data and data collection. Since one researcher conducted the study through an autobiographical, subjective, and objective lens, the research analysis will always be open to interpretation. However, as this work was a critical self-analysis committed to the exploration of the self, it

fulfilled its purpose of liberating and enlightening the researcher and reader by the very nature of the study. I must be honest with myself when referencing past events since the events that I am referencing happened many years ago, and as often is the case, memories fade, which could pose a reliability and validity issue.

Operational Definitions

For this study, the following definitions will be used:

Wagner (1990) explains that ethnographic research attempts to, "develop an understanding of how a group of people live and work together, the meanings those people ether construct or perceive in the activities they share, and the practices through which they affirm, refine or give life to such meaning" (p. 196).

Ellis et al. (2011) explain that autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience to understand cultural experience. A researcher uses tenets of both autobiography and ethnography; thus, as a method, autoethnography is both a process and product.

The following definition of resiliency is from a Greek study conducted on primary principals:

In psychology, resilience refers to an individual's tendency to deal successfully with stress and adversity (Patterson & Kelleher, 2005).

For this study, the term *colonia* referred to the Hidalgo County *colonia* called *Las Milpas*, located in Pharr, Texas; in addition, the definition from the Texas Secretary of State also applied:

The term "*colonia*," in Spanish means a community or neighborhood. The Office of the Secretary of State defines a "*colonia*" as a residential area along the Texas-Mexico border that may lack some of the most basic living necessities, such as potable water and sewer systems, electricity, paved roads, and safe and sanitary housing (Texas Secretary of State, 2013). In this study, South Texas will be synonymous with the Rio Grande Valley.

Summary

There is an achievement gap between Hispanic children and their counterparts. Despite the many successes that Hispanics have had, this continues to be the case even though we are as hard-working and interested in higher education as any other ethnic group. For the most part, in South Texas, there is an increasing number of Hispanics enrolling in institutes of higher education, but their completion rate is lagging behind the rest of the state.

As a Hispanic, having lived in a South Texas *colonia*, I know from first-hand experience what many of our students go through daily. I will attempt to analyze portions of my life to gain a deeper understanding of how to put more Hispanic children on the road to success. As a charter school principal in the same *colonia* that I grew up in, I saw that many of the challenges that I encountered growing up still existed for students. I have dedicated my life to changing the lives of children, and I hope that this study will not only help other educators learn about the children they serve but that it will provide a robust framework for them to follow. This study will be an alternative to learning about low-income Hispanic children, as it will involve the researcher becoming the research. Guajardo and Guajardo (2007) explain that "While books are important, they are not central to building young minds, helping schools thrive, or revitalizing communities.

Learning comes from people, primarily from listening to them, working with them, and creating with them" (p. 31). This study will help me learn more about myself so that I, in turn, can help my students become even more successful.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The bridge I must be
Is the bridge to my own power
I must translate
My own fears
Mediate
My own weaknesses

I must be the bridge to nowhere
But my true self
And then
I will be useful

(excerpt from The Bridge Poem by Donna Kate Rushin, in This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by radical women of color, 1981)

As I set out on this journey of self-discovery and scholarly commitment, I realized that for me to do justice to this project thoroughly, I needed to dig into not just learning about myself, but also about the field of study I was joining. I decided that I must trace and follow the autoethnographic approach from its source to its current form.

The use of stories or narratives in academic research is a relatively new phenomenon, but it is a tried and true way of teaching, learning, and preserving our cultural heritage. I began my review by looking at the history of autoethnography and traced its beginnings to the turn of the

twentieth century. I created a visual timeline based on Mendez's (2013) explanation to get a visual understanding of the trajectory of autoethnography and its roots within the social sciences.

In this chapter, I will be providing an in-depth review of autoethnography, its beginnings, divergence, reconnection, current status, and my approach to the work. I believe that my early years living and growing up in a South Texas *colonia* played a significant role in my ontology; I will include a review and history of *colonias* and *colonia* life. I will include a section on educational leadership and the impact that socially and culturally aware leaders have on students, faculty, and their communities.

What is Autoethnography?

Autoethnography as a research method, has many different definitions. Delamont (2009) asserts that there is no universally accepted definition of autoethnography. Deitering (2011) goes as far as stating, "there is no right way to do autoethnography" (p. 11) which, is the power of using this approach because it is tailored to the author, research, or circumstance. Le Roux (2017) argues that "although autoethnographers define autoethnography differently, the concepts of personal experience and culture appear central to their definitions" (p. 198). Delamont (2009) posits, "autoethnography is antithetical to the progress of social science because it violates the two primary tasks of social science which are: to study the social world and to move their discipline forward" (p. 60). Autoethnography, however, is also focused on the human aspect of research and provides a deeper understanding of the social construct and its relationship to the author and the reader. Lowenheim (2010) defines autoethnography as a way and method to reflect on the mutual constitution of the self and the social. It allows one to consider how her/his personal and professional subjectivity was constructed and how her/his actions in the world

reproduce or change this world. Autoethnography offers an opportunity to interact with the self and the world, and to consider how what we do or not do has an impact on the world we live in. When others read our work, it may expose them to similar understandings and provide a framework for action.

Ellis et al. (2011) state that "autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (p. 273). The authors clarify that autoethnographic research evolved from the canonical, parochial, narrow, limiting process to a way of producing more meaningful research based on writing personal experiences. The researcher can then compare and contrast experiences with current research. When we use this approach to research, we are reaching a more diverse audience than has traditionally been involved. Lundquist (2003) clarifies that "auto-ethnographies demonstrate how ancestry, race, gender, ethnicity, mythology, class, geographical locale and historical moment are taken into account when an author formulates a notion of self" (p. 70). He shares that our identities are also a combination of many different personas. In my case, my social upbringing differs from many of my colleagues; therefore, my values are unlike those of my peers that forces me to navigate through the duality and often a plurality of my existence.

Adding a different twist Chapman-Clarke (2016) states that "autoethnography is both the process and product and that the researcher's biography is a crucial part" (p. 10). She states autoethnography allows the researcher to tie the personal with the social, cultural, and transpersonal through the use of epiphanies. Hughes and Noblit (2017) emphasize that "autoethnography has much to teach us about how social and cultural contexts shape and are

shaped by the lives of humans" (p. 212). This research approach showcased how our personal lives interact with what we are exploring and make the process and product much more potent for the author and the reader. Hughes (2008) quotes Reed-Danahay in explaining that the use of autoethnography produces a transferable self-critique. Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang (2010) clarify that autoethnography is a research method designed to connect the self and others while using self-data to create a more in-depth understanding. They posit that research is always an extension of the researcher's life and that while traditionally, researchers have trained to separate themselves objectively from their work, the task is merely impossible and state that "unapologetically they are doing autoethnography" (p. 2). Atkinson (2006) highlights that "all ethnographic work implies a degree of personal engagement with the field and with the data (that are always made and not given)." Autoethnography is grounded in explicit recognition of those biographical and personal foundations" (p. 402). Brown (1991), on the other hand, argues that ethnohistory (autoethnography) is a combination of many different research approaches and that it heavily borrows from other disciplines. She states that "ethnohistorians are intellectual free traders; we borrow other people's methods, concepts, and tool kits, from linguistics, archaeology, geography, and literary criticism, and we thereby enrich ourselves, even if we risk making them more complicated and ourselves more confused" (p. 115).

History of Autoethnography

If we were to trace autoethnography linearly, we would see that it has its beginning in anthropology, sociology, and the Chicago school of Ethnography (Mendez, 2013). Ryang (2000) states that one of the critiques of autoethnographic writing is that [it is] self-oriented, self-focused, and self-exploring; however, the conscious use of personal data is not new in

anthropology. The use of personal data can be more than a look at life-history; it can also include an intimate encounter. Ryang (2000) points out that while the stories could be fantasy, they still reflect social and cultural values. The challenge is squeezing personal encounters into an epistemological and academic framework, which involves totalization and reduction (p. 300). Deegan (2001) clarifies that under the tutelage of Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, "sociologists analyzed the everyday life, communities and symbolic interactions characteristic of a specific group" (p. 2). According to Anderson (2006a), this began with Robert Park's interest in his student's background, which prompted several of his students to pursue research that was closer to their personal lives. They did not, however, approach the work reflexively; they were focused on studying the "what," not the "why" (Nash & Viray, 2013), which will be discussed further as a way to conduct analysis.

Between 1917 and 1942, Park and Burgess guided several students through their writing of multiple ethnographies that showcased the researcher embedded within the community they were studying. Counter to the positivist approach to research and analysis, much of the work Park and Burgess' students were producing "spurned complex, abstract theoretical language" (Deegan, 2001, p. 6). The Chicago School of Ethnography's approach to research played an instrumental role in the development of autoethnography. It provided the groundwork and nucleus for personal narratives and the next step or evolution in the field of ethnography, the study of the self. "Chicago School ethnographers of both generations often had autobiographical connections to their research, but they were neither particularly self-observational in their method nor self-visible in their texts" (Anderson, 2006a, p. 376).

The Chicago School of Ethnography had an impact beyond the social sciences and reached into other fields like political science. Burnier (2006) explains that there is a difference between the Chicago School in sociology and political science. In sociology, it is referring to the group of individuals responsible for the emergence of participant observation and ethnography. In political science, it refers to the application of statistics to the study of political science in an attempt to make it more scientific. Burnier (2006) clarifies that there is an absence of the personal and the self in political science research. Political scientists do not write about themselves, and this leads to a detachment from their work; autoethnography addresses this detachment.

By 1979, David Hayano became the first anthropologist to refer to autoethnography in research (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Hayano (1979), who used the term autoethnography in making a case for self-observation in cultural anthropology and then later demonstrated this approach in Poker Faces (1982), did not consider it a specific research technique, method or theory (Douglas & Carless, 2013). Hayano (1979) points out that the field of anthropology was changing because many minorities were training in the field, and the general impetus was to study their backgrounds. While fieldwork had long been considered a stalwart for new anthropologists in non-western societies, this became increasingly difficult in a post-colonial era. One advantage of this new chapter is that researchers had access to an intimate knowledge of the groups they belonged to and studied. Intimate knowledge in autoethnography is akin to Ellis et al. (2011) witness analogy, where the reader, acting as a witness to the research or process, may also gain knowledge or power from the study. Hayano (1979) cautioned, however, that too much

information can also be dangerous to the researcher if publishing data that is private and sensitive.

In the 1980s, a shift occurred in the social sciences that pushed the method even more toward a more personalized approach. Ellis et al. (2011) explain that the postmodernist "crisis of confidence or representation" that beset the social sciences in the 1980s led to a transformation that pushed researchers to use stories to not only explain phenomena but also to teach morals and ethics as a way to help the reader develop a better understanding of the self. Researchers desired a way to incorporate personal stories that would illuminate current political and social phenomena as a response to the canonical, positivist approach to research that separated the subject from the researcher and focused primarily on numerical data. The authors claim that scholars began to consider what social sciences would become if they were closer to literature than to physics. This new approach also led to a rethinking of epistemology as different people see and know the world from a different perspective. Traditional research approaches tend to limit the scope of awareness to the dominant culture.

Two paths: evocative and analytical

Until recently, autoethnographers have fallen into one of two camps: evocative autoethnographies or analytical autoethnographies. According to Bochner & Ellis (2016), "an autoethnographic experience merges our personal and scholarly lives" (p. 24). It is this personal side that lends itself to evocative autoethnography because its design evokes emotion and understanding with the reader. Bochner and Ellis (2016) explain:

> Autoethnography brings heightened attention to human suffering, injustice, trauma, subjectivity, feeling, and loss… and this encourages the development of reflexive and creative methodologies through which to navigate the lived experience; it legitimizes unconventional forms of documenting and expressing personal experience in literary, lyrical, poetic, and performative ways (p. 45).

There is much discussion about the value that each approach brings to the field; I argued that a combination of both was best suited for my study. Wall (2016) posits that there are two polarized sides to autoethnography: evocative and analytical and while she initially proposes a moderate, or middle ground between the approaches, she goes on to state that she "…is advocating for an ethical and self-focused but analytical approach to autoethnography" (p. 7). Wall (2016) prefers that autoethnography use personal experience while maintaining scholarly potential. She points out that the use of several terms like autobiography, narrative, and autoethnography frequently diminish the effect of the work because it could confuse the reader. Wall postulates that in "writing autoethnography, the message has to be clearly stated, and the thematic areas of concern should be spelled out" (p. 4). The argument reaffirms her stance on autoethnography being more analytical rather than evocative. The author continues by writing, "I am encouraging autoethnographers to move in a particular direction by asking them to be clear about their purpose, provide a level of analysis, and attend to the ethical issues that arise in this form of work" (p. 5). She continues by stating, "if the authors wish to use them to linkages between the micro and the macro, which is the stated purpose of autoethnography, there is a need for thick description, analysis, and theorizing" (p. 6).

Jackson and Mazzei (2008) disagree with evocative autoethnographic authors in that narrative stories merely want to be shared and appreciated rather than analyzed. They propose that rather than focusing on the autoethnographer' s epistemology, we should instead focus on the ontology. Writers “should confront what they hear and how they hear (their privilege and authority in listening and telling) and deconstruct why one story is told and not another” (p. 300). The authors argue that merely telling of the story is not enough because the process is not self-evident, and the reader is still left to interpret the story. This argument is akin to Wall (2016) asking for autoethnographers to chart a path for the reader. Jackson and Mazzei (2008) point to the lack of experience and understanding of the self that could preclude readers from fully understanding the narrative. Since the autoethnographer's life experiences are used as data, we run the risk of using that voice as the only voice of truth, and the reader is forced to accept that telling of the story as is and not interpret its meaning or focus. The deconstruction of autoethnography that Jackson and Mazzei (2008) suggest is a move away from analyzing the account and move toward discovering how the reader engages with the text. They argue against the disproportionate amount of using the word “I” in narratives in an attempt to displace the certainty that the “I” speaks the truth. They propose a new performative “I” that “has the potential to produce evocative, ethical, and failed practices that result in a telling with the potential to open gaps and produce different knowings” (p. 314).

Hermann (2012) categorizes himself as a “second-generation” qualitative researcher that follows the path of previous modernist researchers. These second-generation researchers are growing up in the post-modernist era; however, their work is still evocative and transcending. Hermann (2012) explains that while traditional positivist work, like statistics, often attracts his

attention, “it will never move [him] because it follows the canonical Western philosophical tradition of dividing the world into subject-object; it believes language is but a tool to transmit information and that certain metaphors, like science and management, dictate not only what to write about, but how to write” (p. 137). In fact, “qualitative research is a struggle and form of resistance against the discourse of academic capitalism” (p. 145). Autoethnographers often face this struggle when presenting their work. The following are a few ways that Hermann (2012) offers as opportunities for the qualitative research field to grow.

- Reexamine how the work has important impacts beyond the written page.
- The irony of academic research holds true. We are supposed to provide new information to the body of knowledge, yet we are often constrained in our attempts by the positivist approach.
- We need to embrace, not only performance-based expressions of excellence but technologically-enhanced ways of defending a dissertation because most researchers do not think in linear, canonical fashion.
- We have met the enemy, and they are us- we do not have to accept the terms by which others define us and our work (p. 148).

Berry and Patti (2015) quote Crawford and state that, “the goal is to convey evocative and personal stories and to orient to acts of artistic self-representation as a principal means of applying research, in an attempt to make new and exciting things appear in the pages of the academic journal” (p. 266). They explain that readers of autoethnographies often become intertwined within the stories that they read as the intended impact of this type of writing is to have the reader generate their conclusions from the stories they are reading. Much like Wall

(2016), Berry and Patti (2015) advise researchers to be "wise to be more specific in expressing the motivations and goals that guide our projects" (p. 267). In short, as autoethnographic scholars, we should be transparent with our readers about the starting point or goal of the work, but still, provide an opportunity for the reader to draw their conclusions. They conclude by stating that there is "something intrinsic to the telling of stories from which others can learn and grow" (p. 268). Autoethnography showcases to the reader how the writer sees the world and draws them in to be part of the process. Denzin (2006) enhances his point by stating, "today I want to write myself into and out of this history and this is why I write my version of autoethnography" (p. 426).

A few scholars (Anderson & Austin, 2011; Atkinson, 2006) recommend a more structured approach to autoethnographic work. Anderson and Austin (2011) argue that autoethnography has grown in popularity over the past twenty years as a way to incorporate the self into the research as a complete member researcher (CMR). It is an attempt to become an active participant in the phenomena studied. While Anderson (2006a) espouses the merit of evocative or performative autoethnography, the author is generally concerned that the approach will surpass analytic autoethnography. Anderson and Austin (2011) describe the current state of autoethnography as existing within two paradigms: evocative and analytic. Authors like Ellis, Bochner, and Denzin champion evocative autoethnography because it elicits emotional responses from both the reader and the writer.

The analytical approach preferred by Anderson has ties going back to Hayano (1979) and is "grounded in traditional social science epistemological assumptions and committed to theoretical and conceptual analysis" (p. 132). Anderson and Austin (2012) argue that while there

are some differences between the two approaches, they do have something important in common. They "both have a methodological and representational commitment to reflexively engaging the researcher's self as integral to the ethnographical enterprise …" (p. 132). To qualify as autoethnographies, "the researcher's personal experiences must be directly interwoven within the literature and should play an explicit and formative role in both the data collection and analysis of the ethnographic project" (p. 134). They identified four topics for analysis:

1. Identity construction and dramaturgical enactment (Dramaturgical theory suggests that a person's identity is not a stable and independent psychological entity, but rather, it is continuously remade as the person interacts with others).
2. Body, emotions, and knowledge in action
3. Race, class, gender
4. Methodological critique and representational strategies (p. 134).

Anderson (2006a) states that there are three components to creating a more structured, analytical method: The researcher must be 1. a full member in the research group or setting; 2. visible as such as member in the researcher's published texts, and; 3. committed to the analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena.

Atkinson (2006) defends and expands Anderson's (2006a) argument about analytical autoethnography and its importance to the qualitative field. Atkinson (2006) agrees with Anderson that there has always been an interdependence between the researcher and the subject, and there should not be a scientific detachment between the two. Ethnographic research promotes and expects a certain amount of personal engagement. There could be an issue with the

ethnographer becoming more interesting than the ethnography. Atkinson (2013) advocates for a tightening of the modernist approach to ethnographic writing in that he calls for "a more disciplined form of experimentation that [is] more relevant to a modernist sensibility as well as a more faithfully ethnographic" (p. 19). While he rejoices in the aesthetics and what he terms *Avant Garde* approach, the author expresses concern over what he deems conservative textual conventions and scholars missing opportunities to focus more on experimental approaches. The author continues by stating that there is a failure of nerve or reluctance among ethnographers to experiment with research. There has been a refocus on writing that is based on personal experiences and feelings, and they are missing out because they are "reductionist (literally) in reducing social life to an experiential dimension" (p. 27). Atkinson (2013) posits that due to an over-emphasis on writing about experiences, the researcher runs the risk of missing out on the analytical possibilities that are tied to the postmodernist approach to research. The focus on autoethnographic writing limits the author's ability to experiment. Atkinson's (2013) most significant concerns with the modernist approach to autoethnographic research and writing is a potential overemphasis on feelings and personal experiences, which deprives the researcher the ability to explore the analytic possibilities of ethnographic writing fully.

As a counterpoint, Denzin (2006) states that the field of autoethnography is not changing. It is a return to the old, new Chicago School of Anthropology- déjà vu. In his critique of Anderson, he goes on to point out that Anderson worries that evocative or emotional autoethnography will eclipse and surpass the previous approaches to this methodology. In this approach, researchers are more reflective rather than self-indulgent. Denzin (2006) points out that researchers like Ellis, Bochner, Richardson, St. Pierre, Holman Jones, and others want to

transform the world by writing with emotion. Autoethnography displays to the reader how the writer sees the world. Denzin (2006) also reminds us that "ethnography is not an innocent practice" (p. 422). This approach informs the reader how we see the world and helps provide a uniquely personal view of ourselves.

Anderson's (2006a) response to his critics is that it would be a mistake to close the door on the Chicago School approach. He is a traditionalist in his belief of analytic autoethnography. His commitments to social justice, civility, openness, and resistance to fundamentalism guide his attempts to advocate for an analytical approach. Anderson (2006a) argues that many of the researchers opposing his approach are worried that they would essentially kill evocative autoethnography. It would be nearly impossible to feel the impact of analytic autoethnography on realist ethnography. He also states that the best way to validate analytic autoethnography is to showcase it in actual practice.

A hybrid approach

As I wrestled with navigating, my approach to autoethnographic work, I concluded that I preferred a hybrid methodology that blended both evocative and analytical approaches. I felt that this structure would allow me to tell my story and also provide an analysis of who I was, who I am, and who I could become. In "Ethnographic Writing, the Avant-Garde and a Failure of Nerve," Atkinson (2013) also recommends a hybrid approach to what he terms experimental writing because an emphasis on personal experience diverts attention from the analytic focus that is available. Burnier (2006) posits that autoethnography is both personal and scholarly, both evocative and analytical, and descriptive and theoretical. He advocates for keeping evocative and analytical together because scholars will look at analytic autoethnography for analytic and

evocative autoethnography for an emotional response when both are possible in one study. He expresses concern in that separating the two types of autoethnographies will lead to "gendered" dichotomies: heart/mind, emotional/rational, literary-poetic/analytical, personal/scholarly, and descriptive/theoretical. Burnier (2006) fears that just focusing on analytical autoethnography will lead to containing, limiting, or silencing the personal. The author states that "personal writing is hybrid in character, in that it blends and combines an individual's story with his or her scholarly story" (p. 412). Neumann (2010) openly advocates for including emotion into autoethnography but offers a word of caution regarding what he terms memory work. While it is an authentic way of collecting data, it cannot be defined as autoethnographic unless there is clear writing or analysis of those memories.

Wall (2016) suggests that there are two polarized sides to autoethnography: evocative and analytical and while she proposes a moderate, or middle ground between the approaches initially, she goes on state that she, "…is advocating for an ethical and self-focused but analytical approach to autoethnography" (p. 7). This indicates that the author desires that autoethnography use personal experience while maintaining scholarly potential. She points out that the use of several terms like autobiography, narrative, and autoethnography often diminishes the effect of the work because it could confuse the reader. Wall (2016) postulates that in "writing autoethnography, the message has to be clearly stated, and the thematic areas of concern should be spelled out" (p. 4), which displays her stance on autoethnography being more analytical rather than evocative. The author continues by writing, "I am encouraging autoethnographers to move in a particular direction by asking them to be clear about their purpose, provide a level of analysis, and attend to the ethical issues that arise in this form of work" (p. 5). She continues by

stating, “if the authors wish to use them to linkages between the micro and the macro, which is the stated purpose of autoethnography, there is a need for a thick description, analysis, and theorizing” (p. 6).

Decolonizing our thoughts and practices

It is essential to include a portion of the post-positivist approach to research as a means of explaining the importance of moving away from the canonical research approach and what it means to add a more subjective view of the natural phenomena as this will inform my study. A colonial approach to academic research is analogous to a positivist, objective approach to research in that those in power dictate the terms. A decolonized approach is a modern, post-modern, constructionist, realist, and/or subjective method of inquiry. The value of autoethnography for field research in transcultural settings is a way for the colonized to engage within the colonizer's terms, while also remaining faithful to their self-understandings (Butz & Besio, 2004). Autoethnography gives us interpretive power and can help shape methodology; furthermore, it can acknowledge and unsettle the lingering social, political, and representation of the effects of colonial domination (Butz & Besio, 2004).

Autoethnography seeks to decolonize relationships between the researcher and participants by giving voice to those that are traditionally the subjects of research (Burdell & Swadener, 1999). Instead, the historically researched become the researchers, and their work gives voice to their personal stories. Burdell and Swadener (1999) state that autoethnography acts to eliminate the sense of otherness that traditional research imposes, as this practice becomes a bridge between theory and praxis. Autoethnography is a form of self-narrative that places the

self within a social context that allows the researcher to enter the world of research seeking a different, personal understanding of the self that can then informs practice.

Pathak (2010) cautions that the "process of autoethnography disrupts the traditional academic voice but carries with it various pitfalls" (p. 1) because autoethnographers run the risk of becoming autobiographers, memoir writers, or narcissists that become mere storytellers that do not add to the body of knowledge. The author explains that she is drawn to autoethnography because it allows her to not only make sense of her world but also to give voice to her life in a way that traditional scholarly writing fails to do so. Pathak's (2010) work, written as an argument against what scientific imperialism, calls for the "value of interpretivist methodology, the use and value of narrative and singular stories serve to disrupt the idea that aggregated data has more value and better serves the intellectual enterprise…" (p. 4).

Autoethnography allowed the author to bridge her love for fiction and storytelling with her academic voice. Pathak (2010) explains that the use of a postcolonial approach allows the researcher to engage in political ways and find value in the telling of stories. He uses Gonzalez' (2003) four ethics to exist within the system without being determined by it, which allows the author to blend her personal beliefs and narratives while working within the confines of a positivist and post-positivist approach. The four ethics are accountability, context, truthfulness, and community. According to Pathak (2010), because of her ability to combine scholarly writing with autoethnography, she can "create legitimate sources for other autoethnographers as they work to articulate the legitimacy of their voices" (p. 9). Ethnography frees the researcher from the accepted conventions of detached observer and allows us to provide emotion and feeling into

our research so that the reader also creates a bond with the work that helps create a deeper understanding of the phenomena.

Epiphanies and memories

Epiphanies can be starting points to autoethnographic research and stories. They can aid in ascertaining how a person negotiates challenging situations, and while these play an essential role in the researcher's life and work, it is critical to note that while epiphanies may be transformative to the researcher; this may not be the case for the reader (Ellis et al., 2011). Epiphanies play a significant role in my life and my development as a person and as an educational leader. I would argue that epiphanies have had a life-altering effect on me since they go beyond revealing an essential or significant event; epiphanies have forced me, knowingly or unknowingly, to course correct the direction my life or career is taking.

Chapman-Clarke (2016) states that autoethnography is both the process and product and that the researcher's biography is a crucial part of both" (p. 10). She explains that autoethnography allows the researcher to tie the personal with the social, cultural, and transpersonal using epiphanies. She cautions that not all epiphanies are welcomed, nor do they put us on the right path, but I feel that while this may be the case, epiphanies have played a significant role in shaping who I am as a person and how I interact with myself and with others.

Memory plays a significant role in autoethnographic research. It is through memory that we can recall, relive, and repeat, if necessary, and, hopefully, certain aspects of our lives. As mentioned earlier, for me, memory is both a blessing and a curse. Ellis (2013) illustrates that writing helps remember and provide a more precise understanding of what happened and helps

navigate through not only what happened, but also what could happen; memory offers an opportunity for us to not only recall past events but to begin to analyze actions and effects.

Memory aids introspection, which is a central tenet to conducting autoethnography. Memory is a tool in the autoethnographic process and, when coupled with writing, can be beneficial to both the writer and the reader. Poulos (2012b) details using the writing process to maneuver through challenging times in his life, and he describes using memory and writing to heal from turbulent or "crashes" that he has endured. This is analogous to life-changing epiphanies. Poulos examines memories as a way to discern how he has handled such events as they occurred in his life and to move past them. According to the author, memory can be useful and challenging (my reference to my memory is both a blessing and a curse), and states that "writing this way has taught me that the opening to the possibility that inheres in crafting autoethnography-in writing my way through trauma and pain and danger and even joy- is, in fact, a path that carries me through the memory to transcendence" (p. 325). Chapman-Clarke (2016) describes how autoethnography speaks to her because it is more than just a research method; it enables the researcher also to become the subject. Autoethnography can have a profound effect on both the writer and the reader. Therefore, I am approaching my research using the autoethnographic process as a means to not only impact myself but possibly also the reader.

Autoethnography as a bridge

Chapman-Clarke (2016) explains that autoethnographic work in the field of psychology lives in between conventional qualitative research approaches. I also find myself living between two scopes of being. My ontology is caught between how I was raised, and the life I lead now as an educator. One of my favorite sayings is, "you can take the kid out of *Las Milpas*, but you

can't take *Las Milpas* out of the kid" as a way of keeping myself grounded and true to who I am. I believe that it is this tie to who I was that had enabled me to focus on what I do, why I do it, and how I do it. Autoethnography will be my bridge to my past and my future since the purpose of a bridge is to connect one side with the other. A traveler can traverse in either direction (Boylorn, 2014). This ability to move in either direction gives the reader and me the power to choose. The metaphorical bridge also connects the reader with the writer and creates more than a traveling companion; it fosters a genuine connection between the researcher and the work, the reader and writer, and, more importantly, the process and product. Mendez (2013) argues that autoethnography provides the reader with a direct link to the researcher's experiences.

Reed-Danahay (1993) suggests the researcher learns through active participation in the study and that "we learn not just with our minds, but also with our bodies and through our actions" (p. 221). The author states that if we can manipulate situations, then we have power. Autoethnography is an analogy on how the researcher can expand beyond the constraints of a positivist approach to research, thereby shifting power to the researcher.

Boylorn (2014) states that "auto/ethnography is like a bridge on my body marked in words and scripts that tell stories and secrets in invisible ink only I can see" (p. 313). She uses the analogy of a bridge to look at differences between her upbringing and life and those around her in an attempt at understanding who she is and why she is, in essence, her epistemology and her ontology. Autoethnography forces the researcher to focus on specifics surrounding his or her life in an attempt to "write to make sense of [her]self and to make sense of [her] world" (p. 316). Autoethnography is a constructionist approach that is a desire to investigate how we influence places and culture, and how places and culture influence us (Boylorn, 2014). The power of

autoethnography is to move us in some way and, in doing so, shapes who we are and, ultimately, our voice and how we use it (Poulos, 2012b).

While bridges can only convey the traveler in one of two directions at a time, autoethnography lets us focus intently in any direction we want to inform our ontology. It is this control that makes autoethnography a comprehensive tool in the study of the self and the impact we have on our surroundings and how our surroundings impact us. In "Heartful Autoethnography," Ellis (1999) explains that the goal of autoethnography is to use personal experience that can be generalized to a larger group or culture. In autoethnography, we start with the specific (self) and then zoom out to the group as a way of inserting ourselves into the text and exploring emotions and events introspectively to construct meaning. Hokkanen (2017) maintains that autoethnography looks at two components as a basis for analysis: introspection and cultural analysis. The author describes the process as zooming in to the personal and then zooming out to the general or a "wider, cultural concepts, and frameworks" (p. 27). Autoethnographic research, process, or product is neither linear nor sequential. Instead, the process is cyclical, where the researcher is continually zooming in and out from the personal/specific to the group/general. Ellis (2013) posits that we need to analyze our current existence by looking at our past as a way to move forward, especially when we are dealing with a particularly challenging situation. According to the author, writing helps clear the mind and provides clarity as we contemplate moving forward. She explains that "writing moved me to action, as each day I contemplated at my desk what had occurred, who I had been, and how I might do better tomorrow" (p. 43). Writing helps us remember and provide a clearer understanding of what happened, which helps us navigate through not only what happened, but also with what could happen. Trostin (2013)

studies how the different places he has lived have "shaped, challenged, tested, and tempered" (p. 92) who he is as a person and posits that identity is continuously evolving and influenced by our surroundings. Much like Trostin, my desire to analyze my past as a way to move forward has led me to autoethnography because "the introspective journey into my life through this autoethnographic study [will give] me a greater sense of who I am and [it will lead] me to embrace my cultural roots and to reflect on my personal and professional transformations" (Trostin, 2013, p. 101).

Ethics in Autoethnography

Like in any research, the role of ethics and ethical behaviors and practices play a significant role in the design and implementation of any study. One of the challenges of autoethnography lies in the fact that while we share stories that are personal to us, they also involve others in our lives. According to Ellis (2007), there are two universally accepted dimensions of ethics: procedural and ethics in practice. She adds another component to ethics in autoethnography: relational ethics due to the narrative nature of the methodology. She expounds on the fact that some of the stories that autoethnographic researchers use often include others. As researchers, "we encounter ethical situations that do not fit strictly under the procedures specified by IRBs" (p. 5). Often in autoethnographies, researchers include personal narratives that involve the passing of either family members or close friends, and it is vital to anticipate how other close members will react to the telling of those stories.

Ellis (2007) argues that to write an effective autoethnography, we must include personal highs and lows as well. These instances have helped shape who we are as people and have had far-reaching effects. Borrowing from the universally accepted, first, do no harm, the author

describes advice she provides students when they are involved in the autoethnographic study. At the heart of it is the premise that, as researchers, we have to think about the greater good and to consider, "does it justify the potential risk to others?" (p. 24). Ellis (2007) declares that we are not the sole owners of our stories and that we should always consider that; while we "strive to present truthful accounts, the essence of experience, rather than the Truth or an objective account, there is a mindful slippage between Truth and truthfulness" (Medford, 2006, p. 853). I realized that while I would put my stories on paper as honestly and as directly as I could through a reflective lens, others playing a part in the story may question the accuracy. Medford (2006) explains that there is slippage between Truth and truthfulness in autoethnographic writing because of the necessity to "edit or abbreviate" our stories in our writing. As an autoethnographer, I will strive to write with as much truth as possible while being mindful of the close difference between Truth and truthfulness. After all, this will be my story; my intended purpose is to focus on transformation, for the reader and myself, because when others read my work, it may expose them to similar understandings and provide a framework for action.

Lowenheim (2010) cautions autoethnographers to be wary of the risk we put ourselves in when sharing personal experiences and the criticism we may encounter from both the stories and the autoethnographic approach to research. This point is similar to Nash and Viray's (2013) Pandora's Box advice. Like Ellis (2007), Lowenheim (2010) expresses concerns over relaying stories that involve others and the tension that it may cause as others often share our stories. The author references IRB rules that explicitly state, "that the research poses no risk or harm to the human subject participants" (p. 1030). Lowenheim offers a few suggestions regarding ethically approaching the work. First and foremost, we must decide if the information we have is pertinent

to the research and will help prove or support it, and we must prepare ourselves for any discomfort it may cause us or others.

The power of autoethnography for the educator

Jon Wagner (1990) states that ethnographic research attempts to, "develop an understanding of how a group of people live and work together, the meanings those people ether construct or perceive in the activities they share, and the practices through which they affirm, refine or give life to such meaning" (p. 196). Wagner's approach to studying school administrators melds the two concepts of administrators using an ethnographic approach to study their organizations and using that acquired knowledge to make informed decisions that will help shape the organization. As a district-level administrator, I know that it is important that I constantly review my organization's health to make on the spot recommendations or adjustments when it comes to student achievement. Wagner (1990) states that "…official statistics fall far short of the information needed by an educational administrator to make good judgments about developing or terminating programs or about supervising, evaluating, or assigning personnel" (p. 200). As a result, I have learned to look through my political, cultural, social, and technical lens to help me move our organization forward. I must be able to filter all distractions to truly focus on students, teachers, and our community. The Wagner approach to having administrators study their school as ethnographers can help administrators act in what Spindler and Spindler (1988) call *in situ* hypothesis forming. This approach helps administrators make informed decisions that will influence student achievement.

To become better at what I do, I must take time to study who I truly have become, and the journey that I have taken to get there, and an autoethnography is the perfect vehicle to get me

there. An autoethnography is an exploration into the self and how our surroundings shape and often dictate who we are, what we believe in, and how we act or portray ourselves. Spindler and Spindler (1988) provide a significant outline for writing ethnographies in *Teaching and Learning How to do the Ethnography of Education* for ethnographers to follow as we delve into the exploration of the self. One of the most important pieces of guidance is that hypotheses must be developed after the observations and that as researchers, we are merely reporting what we see, and not reaching or inferring conclusions. In effect, we must separate ourselves from what we are studying, which can create some difficulties for the autoethnographer, because we are studying ourselves and our interactions with our surroundings. Spindler and Spindler (1988) posit that, "the problem is that ethnography provides the raw material for inferencing, but inferencing must be minimized while doing ethnography and writing an ethnographic report" (p. 252). The major challenge in writing an autoethnography is that it is written from the author's point of view, and other researchers cannot truly validate most of the information. The authors explain that one of the most important requirements for an ethnographic approach is that, "behavior in situation must be explained from the native's point of view and both the behavior and explanation must be recorded as carefully and systematically as possible, using whatever aids are expedient, such as note-taking, tape recorders, and cameras" (p. 250). This presents a unique situation because, as autoethnographers, we must explore ourselves and truly dig deep into our being, our ontology, to represent who we truly are.

Although many themes can be explored in an autoethnography, I will focus primarily on how my community has shaped my personal, social, cultural, and professional self. An autoethnographic journey into how politics either shapes our lives or how we become politicians

to fit the moment can best be described by examining our political imagination. Guajardo, Guajardo, Valadez, and Oliver (Spring, 2012) explain that "the imagination is a necessary condition that encourages and inspires advocacy and action" (p. 14). Politics and the political imagination play an important role in the lives and work of school administrators as we work toward helping students and developing teachers and policies that will influence many others. The authors explain that we must force ourselves to reflect on our work and how it relates to advocacy and action. In short, we must be advocates for our students, and examining our political imagination compels us to look closely at what we are doing and what effects we are imparting. In a second article, Guajardo et al. (Spring 2012) expound on the political imagination by stating that, "becoming a public person and an advocate for children, families, and learning communities require skills that bridge the personal ontologies with the historical, biological, cultural, political, and pedagogical realities of our schools and communities. Integral to this development is an understanding of the self as an educational leader" (p. 19). Guajardo et al. (2013) use of the circle process to entice participants to share personal stories is an effective way to gather information. The challenge presented here is how to use this process in writing an autoethnography since this is an exploration of the self. A true sense of political imagination can lead to developing a deep understanding of how we interact with others and how our personal beliefs shape our policies.

Aside from political upbringing, culture plays an enormous role in who we are, and as school administrators, we must have a deep understanding and respect for our students' culture. As an educator from South Texas, I know that most of my students, while perhaps not fully impoverished, do live well beneath the poverty line, and this shapes who they are and how they

interact with others. Personally, having been raised in the same *colonia* that many of my students live in and under the same conditions, I know that the study of culture plays a big role in autoethnography. My approach to this is that in studying myself, I may be able to provide other educators an insight into how to reach their students. Oscar Lewis' (1998) *The Culture of Poverty* provides an exceptional view of the development of the culture of poverty, which can become a lethal cycle for many of our students. Lewis (1998) writes:

> The people in the culture of poverty have a strong feeling of marginality, of helplessness, of dependency, of not belonging. They are like aliens in their own country, convinced that the existing institutions do not serve their interests and needs. Along with this feeling of powerlessness is a widespread feeling of inferiority, of personal unworthiness (p. 17).

As an educator that grew up poor and in a *colonia,* this self-study will provide a blueprint for others to follow as we strive to break this poverty cycle. Lewis (1998) wrote that many in the United States did not think that poverty would persist in this country because of our history, which I imagine is the rugged individual persona and a strong economy. Unfortunately, almost fifty years later, many of our students continue to live in poverty. The author argues that not all poor people have lived in the culture of poverty and that this is more of a mindset. As an autoethnographer, educator, and former *colonia* resident, I know that not everyone lives in a culture of poverty and that this is a mindset that can be changed.

Keeping with the same theme, but a different argument, Ladson-Billings (2006) posits that we do not have a culture of poverty; what we do have is the inverse, poverty of culture. In other words, we are poor or lacking in not just culture, but the understanding of culture. Ladson-Billings argument, as it relates to teaching, is important for an ethnographer because it forces us

to re-examine how we approach and understand our students. The author, referencing student teachers, asserts that "…at the same moment teacher education students learn nothing about culture; they use it with authority as one of the primary explanations for everything from school failure to problems with behavior management and discipline" (p. 104). She brings forth a strong argument against using culture to explain away achievement gaps for our students. I think this is a smart approach, especially for an ethnographer, because we have to look at culture as a way to build students, not to explain shortcomings. She follows with, "of course 'culture' is the only answer if the students in question are not white, not English speaking, and not native-born U.S. citizens" (p. 106), which is a compelling statement for a former South Texas educator and now West Texas administrator to ponder because most of my students match this profile. Overall, there are many approaches to writing an autoethnography, as an educator, I must investigate my political imagination and my awareness of how culture forms our schools.

The use of stories or personal narratives

The power and beauty of autoethnography is the researcher embedding him or herself into the study and conveying learning to the reader while also allowing the reader to analyze and formulate conclusions. Often, the autoethnographer uses stories or personal narratives to invite the reader into the world of the researcher. Bochner (2012) quoting Richardson explains that the use of stories by authors helps the writer in the telling about the social world and the reader in knowing and understanding the social world. Bochner (2012) asserts that not only should we be writing narratives, but the method of "representing and expressing lived experiences should be narrative as well" (p. 156). Furthermore, he suggests that because "the world can't speak for itself, all attempts to represent the world involve transforming a speechless reality into a

discursive form that makes sense" (p. 157). Through autoethnography, I give voice to my experiences and life.

As autoethnographers, that is what we do; we attempt to put into words our experiences and how they have impacted us and others. We transform ourselves from being mere journalists, reporting events to writers living within the circumstances. Bochner (2012) continues by explaining that traditional social science writing focuses on occasions that fit into a conventional analysis and theoretical description. Most traditional scholarly work is written in the third person. The first-person narrative is an alternative to this canonical approach that enables us to interact with the written word. Bochner (2012) uses an analogy of the "father tongue" to denote an objective, emotionless, reproachful voice in writing and advocates for the use of the "mother tongue," a more subjective dialogue tied to emotion and experience that not only invites the reader in but protects him/her as well.

Nash and Viray (2013) take it a step further and provide guidelines for the writing of scholarly personal narratives, beginning with addressing four concerns that continually manifest themselves in this type of writing. The authors clarify that autoethnography focuses on three elements: culture, self, and others (p. 45). For the purpose of my study, I will incorporate all three elements.

The goal of autoethnography is to form a self-narrative approach in a way that provides others a deeper understanding of the author and themselves. Nash and Viray (2013) advocate for a constructionist approach to help make meaning of the text and to create an opportunity for exploration due to its "liberating, empowering, and self-clarifying nature" (p. 45). This process also entices the reader to make his or her connections and meaning.

Autoethnography dictates a constant emphasis on the relationship between the person (self) and culture and how it shapes the individual. Nash and Viray (2013) provide an analogy of opening Pandora's box during writing, and the distress that this may cause, but remind the reader that faith, hope, and possibility also lay deep in Pandora's box and the desired outcome is that these too, will reach the reader. They caution researchers to avoid only focusing on the "what" as a way to engage the reader because that approach is tied more to a positivist way. Instead, we must include the "why" as well as this will lead to a deeper understanding of the self and provide answers to the reader. They assert that "every what needs a why; every fact needs insights; actions need reflection, and they all need honest, poignant personal stories to deliver them cogently" (p. 54). In autoethnography or scholarly personal narratives, we must use stories as a context for analyzing the effects outside of ourselves and "explore bigger educational, social, cultural and political issues" (p. 56). Denzin (2006) writes that "ethnography is not an innocent practice" (p. 333). This approach informs the reader how we see the world and helps provide a uniquely personal view of ourselves. Berry and Patti (2015) explain that there is "something intrinsic to the telling of stories from which others can learn and grow" (p. 268). Neumann (2010), in quoting Mauss, states that the body is where three social systems meet: the physiological, psychological, and social. More importantly, they are "mediated by language and cannot be understood outside of it" (p. 1052). Since neither of these systems can communicate, it is up to us to make sense of them, and we do that by adding a layer of analytics.

There is a rich history of using stories to teach and archive culture, values, morals, and customs. In my family, I know about my deceased father and mother and what was important to them through the *cuentos* (stories) that my brothers, sisters, and family friends shared with me.

Without these stories, I would have a void in my life. The use of *cuentos* can provide a rich awareness of my personal, social, cultural, and professional ontology. Gonzalez and Padilla (2008) explain that using *cuentos*, they were able to understand and develop strategies for doing public good.

While my research commenced with stories I may have experienced or told in the past to categorize who I am as a person, the vehicle for analysis will be the use of vignettes. Vignettes offer an opportunity for introspection and connection to the study for both the reader and the writer. Humphries (2005) uses vignettes to provide a window for the reader to view and experience his pleasure and pain associated with an academic career. I used vignettes in the same fashion, an open invitation for the reader. Vignettes are explicitly reflexive (Humphries, 2005).

Vignettes can be used as a theoretical framework to gain a deeper understanding of the self. "How we interpret the lived experience determines whether developed knowledge will result" (Pitard, 2016, p. 2). I am almost certain that most readers will agree that we learn mostly through experience, and using vignettes allows the researcher to selectively choose the most appropriate experiences that have shaped our being. Pitard (2016) offers a framework for analyzing vignettes in a structured, cyclical, six-component process that allows the researcher to dig deep and formulate a clear understanding and potential next steps from personal vignettes. The components are:

1. Context
2. Anecdote
3. Emotional Response
4. Reflexivity
5. Strategies Developed
6. Conclusive comments on Layers (p. 6).

Pitard (2016) clarifies that she "[has] produced within [her] vignettes, not just a short story of a single incident as an anecdote but have located this anecdote within a broad framework which future researchers could utilize in their research process" (p. 14).

In *Unraveling Researcher Subjectivity Through Multivocality in Autoethnography*, Robert Mizzi (2010) provides a tool for analyzing vignettes from within and without different personas. Using a layered analysis, the author provides a reflective synopsis over different experiences that he shares through vignettes. The "voices" range from employee voice/safety voice, homophobic control voice, educator, among other examples. My research can be structured in a layered approach ranging from father, husband, educator, to leader that can provide analysis through different lenses and how these experiences shaped my personal, social, cultural, and professional self. This approach will force me to be hyper reflexive as I analyze my lived experiences and invite the reader to share in my reflexivity and understanding.

Growing up in a *colonia*

While the word *colonia* in Spanish means neighborhood, the term has come to mean many different things to me. Since 2019, there are close to 3,000 *colonias* in Texas alone ("Colonias in Texas," n.d.). *Colonias* are typically found in the unincorporated fringes of urban areas. They owe their creation to developers that sell parcels of land to usually low-income folks in a pay as you go fashion. According to a U.S. News and World Report, *Half a million people live in Texas' colonias* – largely impoverished neighborhoods that fall outside of city limits and can lack basic public services. These orphaned communities are peppered around the Southwest, though most lie along the roughly 1,200-mile Texas-Mexico border. About 900 of the state's *colonias* are concentrated in the Rio Grande Valley's Hidalgo County, one of the fastest-

growing counties in Texas. While many *colonia* residents are living in the country legally, some are not ("America's Third World: Border Colonias in Texas Struggle to Attain Services | Healthiest Communities | U.S. News," n.d.). The office of the Texas Attorney General describes *colonias* [as] substandard housing developments, often found along the Texas-Mexico border, where residents lack essential services such as drinking water, sewage treatment, and paved roads ("Colonias | Office of the Attorney General," n.d.).

Growing up, living in the *Las Milpas colonia* meant that I was from the poor part of town, did not walk on paved roads, and did not have indoor plumbing. Teachers could always identify *colonia* kids by the mud and dirt that often surrounded our classroom desks. What I did have was a community focused on taking care of each other and a place to roam and explore. I include this portion because of the impact that growing up in *Las Milpas* had on me and how it affected my personal and professional life. The reader needs to understand the sometimes harsh and pleasant reality of a *colonia* child.

Summary

The power and challenge, blessing and curse of autoethnography lies in the knowledge that there is no one set way to conduct, do, or write an autoethnography and means different things to different people (Chang, 2008; Wall, 2014). Autoethnography is a post-positivist, modernist, post-modernist methodology that allows the writer to explore the concept of the self in a reflexive manner designed to ascertain how different community and cultural factors shape us. Autoethnography invites the reader to join in the journey of self-discovery. As an educational leader, this method will help me critically analyze myself, my actions, and my decisions to provide a blueprint for future educators.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Why I do what I do

Several years ago, in one of my doctoral classes, I was engaged in a conversation with one of my professors about my dissertation topic at that time. I was proposing conducting a case study on the school at which I was a principal. This topic was important to me not only because of the academic achievements of my students, but more so because the school was in Las Milpas, the colonia where I grew up. My professor counseled me to look at other topics because I would be too "close" to the subject and would be unable to remain objective throughout the study.

I conducted an autoethnographic study in which l planned to include my time at that school and that colonia and the "closeness" to the subject will be a benefit to the analysis, not a deficit. My subjectivity will not only be questioned but encouraged. While engaging in this endeavor, I knew that my objectivity might have been questioned, and I embraced it for "we are all players in making our reality come to life" (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2004). I chose to make my way and chart my journey.

I sought answers to the following research questions and provided an overview as to why I chose each question to guide my exploration into the self and a guide for others.

- What are the social, cultural, and political forces that impacted and shaped me as an educator and as a person?

As educators, we often bring our values, beliefs, and biases into the workplace, and this usually has a profound effect on our students and other faculty members. As an educator, I fundamentally believe that my role is to serve children, and I know that my belief in students and adults affects their performance (Cherng, 2017). This research question forced me to focus on my own personal and professional influences as a way to understand my development, which will provide a guide for other educators.

- To what extent does critical self-reflection play a role in the professional development and effectiveness of educational leaders?

Critical self-reflection is an essential factor for our personal development, but what part does it play with educators? Several years ago, I came up with this mantra that I shared with young leaders and others when they were facing a difficult challenge or obstacle: you must be able to reflect and grow. If we are to grow as educators or individuals, we have to be able to learn from our past so that it can inform our future (Trostin, 2013). As educators, we also have to "learn to reflect critically and to do so in ways that move beyond individualistic and isolated ways of working" (Selkrig & Keamy, 2015, p. 423).

Research Methodology

My approach was qualitative, focused on exploring the nature of my being, and giving voice to my thoughts and beliefs. While my study was qualitative, it was also a combination of postpositivist and postmodernist ways of looking into my work and life and how it can contribute to the development of a theoretical framework that supports the development of educators. Qualitative research develops theories when inadequate theories exist; that is what I attempted (Creswell, 2007). My life has been full of challenges; as a young, low-income Latino growing up in a *colonia* without parents, I had to work harder than others. I have been successful in my chosen profession and managed to not only stay out of prison or the morgue but to have positive effects on others.

Historically, there are two approaches or methodologies to research: quantitative and qualitative. For my research, I categorized positivism as a quantitative approach to research, only in that, I did not conduct objective, quantifiable research. Positivism research or inquiry searches for connections as a means of predicting or controlling phenomena (Park, Konge, & Artino, 2020). Wildemuth (1993) explains that "this approach assumes that reality is objective, transcending an individual's perspective and is expressed in the observable statistical regularities of behavior" (p. 450). Golafshani (2003) explains that qualitative research arrives at findings from a natural setting and does not attempt to find causation or predictability; instead, the researcher seeks understanding. My study neither experimented, quantified nor categorized my way of being; instead, it was a reflexive exploration into the self that put me at the center as a researcher and subject (Belbase, Luitel, & Taylor, 2013) and allowed me to infuse an evocative feeling into the research. Sparkes (2000) asserts that by writing ourselves into the research, we

are challenging the traditionally accepted approach of observation without participation. In positivist studies, the researcher is more of a collector of data or information that explains a naturally occurring phenomenon. Ryan (2006) posits that positivist researchers tend to follow a scientific model designed to dismiss the rich complexity of social life. A shortcoming to this type of research is that while life is not orderly, linear, or structured, this type of research is presented in a quantitative format. Since my study, much like my life, is dynamic and organic and not orderly, linear, or structured, a quantitative or positivist approach was not the best option for my research.

Postpositivist or qualitative research developed as a response to the rigidity of positivist research that attempted to categorize natural phenomena into neat piles of objective categories as a way of explaining or discovering nature and describing the quality of life. For my study, postpositivism equates qualitative and postmodernism will be a component found within that field. As mentioned in chapter 1, a modernist and postmodernist approach to qualitative social science research includes an evocative element designed to elicit a response from both the researcher and the reader through an in-depth analysis of the content. My study will consist of components of an evocative nature in the form of vignettes or scholarly personal narratives intended to evoke emotion and understanding along with other artifacts. Postpositivist research, "emphasizes the meaning and the creation of new knowledge, and can support committed social movements, that is, movements that aspire to change the world and contribute towards social justice" (Ryan, 2006, p. 12).

Postpositivist values in research emphasize multiplicity and complexity as hallmarks of humanity (Ryan, 2006). Postpositivist research is interpretive; it plays an integral part in investigating, allows me to take in a broader view of myself from different vantage points, and

discover my truth. According to Ryan (2006), “we cannot simply aggregate data to arrive at an overall truth” (p. 19). Autoethnography allowed me to best answer my research questions. Adding a narrative component to research helps us comprehend our lives and, “it is essential to the writing up of postpositivist research” (p. 24).

Research Design

My mother passed away when I was four years old; my father followed her nine months later. My oldest sister Margie, eighteen at the time, took over as a full-time parent for my three older brothers, one sister and me from that time on. I often say that my sister is the strongest woman I have ever known in my life, and she has proved that time and time again. I know that I could not have gotten to where I am today if it was not for her courage and resiliency. While my story intertwines with hers, I know that the best approach to this study is autoethnography because my life reflects what I have learned, have been taught, and have applied to not only help myself but others as well. There are many benefits to engaging in autoethnography, but it does also bring emotional drawbacks as well; especially, when it involves the death of a loved one (Ellis, 2007; Pearce, 2010), and that event is part of the study, and I choose to embrace this emotion as a means to arriving at a different stage in my life.

Autoethnography provides the best opportunity for me to not only study myself, but also study how my upbringing shaped who I am as a person, educator, and leader and how this has contributed to how I interact with others (Chang, 2008). My community has played a significant role in helping me carve out my identity, and I know that just like I have had an impact on those around me, others have affected me as well. Egeli (2017) explains that this type of research allows us to capture our cultural fluidity and subjective experiences, which is at the heart of this

methodology. Any facet of my life can be a research focus (Chang, 2008). My research philosophy is rooted in a relative framework that dictates an observation and interaction of the study. Active research aids in the discovery of multiple truths.

Site Selection

Site selection for my research will technically be where I find myself since the intended study is an in-depth look into my personal and professional life. I have lived the majority of my life in deep South Texas in an area known as the Rio Grande Valley, located just a few miles from the Mexican border across from the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. I did spend some time in the U.S. Army serving mostly overseas in West Germany (then Germany) and South East Asia as a combat veteran during Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm. Currently, I reside in El Paso, Texas, where I serve as an Executive Director for a region within a charter school organization.

Data collection

Data plays a vital role in any study, whether quantitative or qualitative. For my research, my personal and professional life will comprise much of my data. “In most autoethnographies, it is the self which is the starting point, rather than another culture” (Butz & Besio in Kraftl, 2017). As the researcher, I was the crucial instrument in collecting data by examining documents, reviewing my behavior, and ultimately cataloging my findings (Creswell, 2013). The power of autoethnography is not so much the method, but what the researcher does (Deitering, 2011) in pursuit of knowledge creation.

I compiled data into two distinct categories: personal memory and artifacts. Personal memory consisted of creating and analyzing “chapters” in my life, which included incidents, experiences, or conversations from my life that had a profound impact on me. The second

category comprised of artifacts that I drew from emails, letters, photographs, and school transcripts, that I saved throughout my personal and professional life or that I requested. It is important to note, however, that as a researcher, the majority of my research was tied either directly or indirectly to personal memory since personal artifacts also serve as stimuli for memory (Kraftl, 2017).

When sharing stories of my life, I have always categorized my life into chapters. While these chapter titles and time frames may have shifted throughout my life, I can say that I have categorized my life into the following:

1. Early years- Birth to high school graduation (1970-1988)
2. U.S. Army Years (1988-1991)
3. My Lost Years (1991-1994) Note: I was lost
4. Married, Focused, Parent, Educator (1994-present)

I thought critically and introspectively about each of these chapters in my life and identified important moments which I then converted to vignettes to both assist in my reflective work and to draw in the reader to actively participate in the process of creating meaning from my personal experiences (Deitering, 2011).

Data Analysis

As a researcher, deep reflection and rigorous analysis play a crucial part in the work I will conduct to create knowledge (Deitering, 2011). Rather than just compiling a list of personal stories or artifacts that provide meaning to me, I will focus on both reflection and introspection as I look to uncover themes across my personal and professional life and contribute to the body

of knowledge. There are two camps in the autoethnographic world: evocative with Ellis (1999, 2007, 2013), Bochner & Ellis (2016) and Denzin (2006) to name a few on one side and an analytical side comprised mostly of Anderson (2006a, 2006b) and Atkinson (2006, 2013). There is a third way to approaching autoethnography as proposed by Wall (2016) and Burnier (2006) that combines both the evocative and analytical into a hybrid approach. I intend to combine elements of both for my study- it will be both evocative and analytical. Anderson (2006a) explains that in addition to being a full, visible member of the group or setting, we must be "committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena" (p. 375). As mentioned in chapter two, there are five essential features that Anderson (2006a) proposed and that I adhered to during analysis:

1. Complete member researcher (CMR)
2. Analytic reflexivity
3. Narrative visibility of the researcher's self
4. Dialogue with informants beyond the self
5. Commitment to theoretical analysis

Data analysis consisted of a modified version of the Structured Vignette Analysis framework offered by Pitard (2016, p. 6).

Figure 1: Structured vignette analysis [10]

Figure 1 Vignette Analysis Framework

Using a similar framework, I was able to provide an in-depth analysis of all data that I used in my study to answer my research questions. Le Roux (2017) explains that rigorous research applies research tools that are appropriate to meet the stated research objectives. My framework was comprised of the following five components:

- Context
- Vignette/artifact
- Evocative response
- Reflexive lens: Axiology/Ontology
- Interpretation

The significant difference between Pitard's (2016) analytical framework, aside from the different categories, was the application of the framework. Rather than following a circular or sequential progression, my approach allowed for the interaction of each component with each other. While this framework was my attempt at creating an analytical framework that could be utilized by other researchers in their work, much like this study, it was virtually impossible to follow an orderly analysis with the hopes of replicating results. The analytical components were utilized; however, since each researcher's experiences are different, the results will be diverse.

This framework provides a possible starting point for any researcher and offers the opportunity to interact and analyze data rigorously using reflection and introspection. The approach allows a fluidity that can be adjusted depending on the situation, feeling, or thematic interpretation.

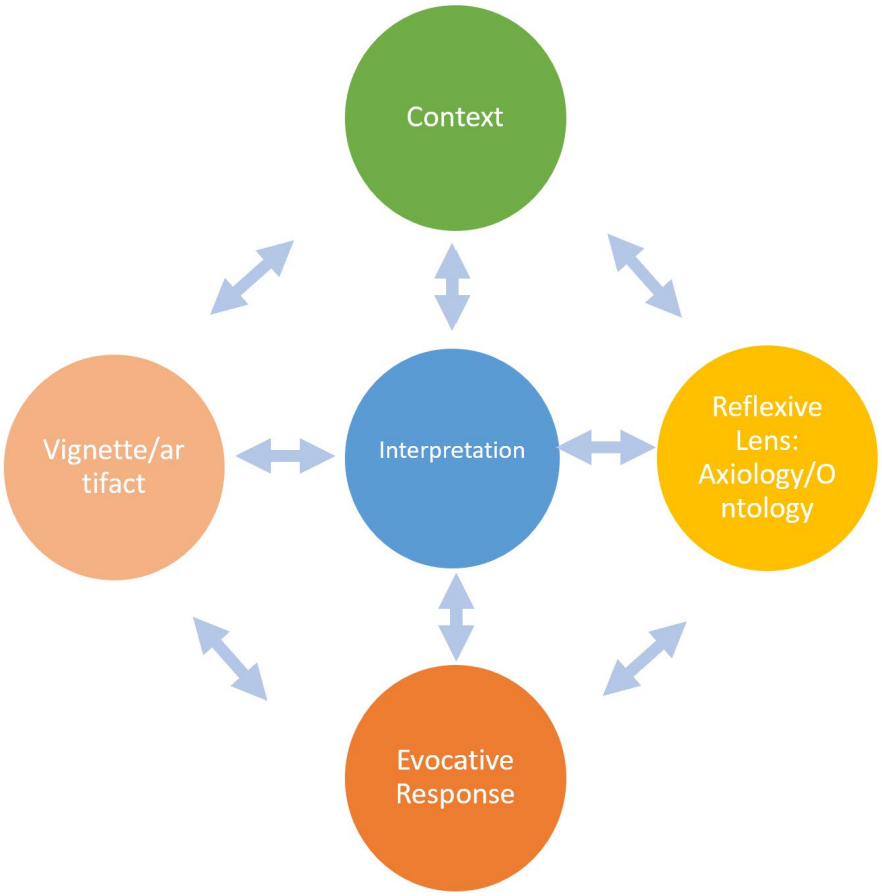


Figure 2 Analysis Framework

Analysis Framework Explained

The analysis framework does not have a starting or ending point. However, it does provide the researcher with an opportunity to choose where to begin based on where the research has led to or where the researcher wants to go. Jones (2005) explains that looking at the world from a particular vantage point can tell, teach, and put people in motion. This analysis protocol

allows the researcher to begin analyzing data from any of the four components or spokes and move in any direction they choose.

Context

Context plays a vital role in developing a deep understanding of both the researcher and the reader. In this analytical framework, the setting sets the stage or background for any of the other components and helps the reader comprehend the meanings and actions of the researcher (Pitard, 2016). Each vignette or artifact had its unique context embedded.

Evocative response

As mentioned earlier, this research project featured a combination of both evocative autoethnographies and analytical approaches. As an autoethnographer, I must gauge and document my emotional reaction to my data collection, and data analysis, as this will have contributed to the shaping of attitudes and behaviors (Buckley, 2015). Emotional regulation or lack of, has played a vital role in my development as both a leader and as a person.

Reflexive Lens: Axiology/Ontology

Davies (2002) explains that reflexivity is turning back on oneself as a process of self-reference. Introspection means to look within oneself. Using this component will enable me to identify how this reflection either changed my axiology or my ontology, who I am or became or what is or was important to me. Reflexivity will also allow me to develop a deeper understanding of how my interaction with the other components shaped my ontology.

Vignette/Artifact

I chose to combine vignettes and artifacts into one component, but I need to point out that while all vignettes can also be artifacts, not all artifacts are vignettes. While I could label this component solely as artifacts, I chose to make the distinction between each because I used both vignettes and other artifacts (emails, personal papers, transcripts, pictures, etc. as points of data). This allowed me to paint a clearer picture for both the reader and researcher.

Interpretation

Regardless of the analytical component, everything must pass through interpretation, which is why this component was placed prominently at the center or hub of the framework. Since autoethnography is also an attempt at self-discovery, I included interpretation as a significant component of my research analysis. This allowed me to view each unique data from a different vantage point.

Quality Assurance

Reliability and validity play a vital role in any type of research, especially in autoethnography. In autoethnography, reliability is tied directly to the researcher's credibility (Ellis et al., 2011). In my case, are the experiences I described factually, and could they be confirmed as happening? I would argue that as this is a project directly relating to my lived experiences, then yes, my data was reliable. It is important to note that, just like most stories have multiple characters, they may also have differing viewpoints, and the lived experience is different for everyone.

Summary

My research approach will be designed to elicit both subjective and objective responses from myself and the reader as I offer a glimpse into the plurality of my personal and professional existence. I have come to accept the fact that as a *colonia* kid working in a high-profile, high impact career, I may feel uncomfortable in certain situations due to my inner battles with imposter syndrome. Throughout my life, I have felt the need to prove myself worthy and that I belong. Even to this day, when I am part of significant social and professional events, I find myself gravitating toward the wait staff, cooks, and helpers. I am not sure if it is because I feel that I don't belong, I find solace in interacting with folks that remind me of my upbringing, or I feel naturally inclined to blend the two worlds: the person I was and the person I am. Deep down, I feel that I am either continuously searching for my bridge, building my bridge, or maintaining my bridge, and this study will be instrumental in assisting me in that regard. I am not the only *colonia* kid that is now an educator or earned a college degree. I know that there will be many others after me, especially if others like me continue to work in the service of children.

Just as I have learned to create my narrative and chart my course around my upbringing and life, I will do the same in this research project. I have had to meld two worlds, and I propose to do the same with this autoethnographic study. My methodology will be both evocative and analytical as I dig into what makes me and help map out similar paths for others like me.

I have come to realize that I live my life with multiple personalities: *colonia* kid, father, brother, educator, leader, and at the core of this work is discovering who I am and how my life can give meaning to myself, my family and to others. In my work, I want to challenge the reader

to respond to and interact with the text in ways that they have not done so before and to change their way of thinking fundamentally or knowing (Keating & Gonzalez-Lopez, 2011).

CHAPTER IV

DATA COLLECTION

Introduction: Why am I?

My story in and by itself is not entirely unique. I am sure there are hundreds if not thousands of children that have endured what I have and more, and I know that I am not the only person to have grieved over a loved one; others hurt as well (Matthews, 2019). Some may agree, disagree, enjoy, or not enjoy the telling and unfolding within it. Still, it will always be mine, and the reader acting as a witness to my life and transformation may also gain knowledge and understanding (Ellis et al., 2011; Wall, 2008). The uniqueness of my story of self can be therapeutic for both the researcher and the reader (Ellis, 1999; Freeman, 2018), and I have approached this work with that point of reference and voracity. Richardson (2000) argues that "ethnographers should not be constrained by the habits of someone else's minds" (p. 254), and that is a perfect analogy for my research. I choose to step out of the norm and opt instead to focus on what I see as the best method to share my research and story.

As part of this autoethnographic journey, I feel that it is crucial I begin with a short historical, biographical excerpt of my life as this will help paint a clearer picture into who I am, who I was, and how my ontology and axiology came to exist. While I was born in Caldwell, Idaho, to migrant parents, I feel that my story begins in that South Texas *colonia, Las Milpas*.

Located just a few miles from the Mexican border city of Reynosa, Tamaulipas, it served as a proving ground for me as it helped shaped me into the person I am. Pizarro (2012) explains that our environment has a big hand in developing our ontology, and by extension, I know my axiology as well. As I delve into my study of the self, I will intertwine *colonia* life, values, and systems into the recording and telling. I use autoethnography to understand my experiences so that I may create a shared truth with the reader (Pearce, 2010). I have chosen to take pieces and lessons from my personal and professional life that have had an impact on me to help understand who I am and what I value- my ontology and axiology.

My mother passed away right before my eyes when I was four years old; my father followed nine months later when I was five. Although both my parents are important to me, it is my mother's death that I recall the most and that I feel had a more significant impact on me and studies show that this is probably one of the most stressful events a child can experience (Pham et al., 2018). For a four-year-old, this event would prove both devastating and formative.

I can still recall vividly, after almost forty-five years, that awful day. I was eating Campbell's™ Chicken Noodle Soup with my mother and our neighbor's daughter Marta when my mother asked me to show Marta my brand-new boots in one of our bedroom closets.

The small boy excitedly tore open the package containing his new boots. As was a tradition in his family when preparing for a big family event, his parents had purchased him an entire brand-new outfit for their cousin's wedding, which was only a few days away. He admired the brown, new leather and stuck his hand into each one and held them up proudly for his friend Marta to also admire. Marta stated they were nice but decided that she would rather eat lunch and headed back to the kitchen to continue eating with the boy's mother.

As the boy began carefully placing his boots back into their box, he heard Marta yelling for him.

"¡Neto, ven aquí! Neto, come here.*"*

Detecting the fear or concern in her voice, the boy hurriedly tossed the boots into the box and ran to the kitchen. Once there, he saw his mother slumped over on the kitchen table. Her eyes closed, unmoving.

As painful as it is to recollect, I know that day changed not only my life but those of my siblings as well. Less than a year later, my father passed away, and my then twenty-year-old sister faced the biggest challenge of her life: take over as head of our small family of six. I have three brothers and two sisters; they are in chronological order from oldest to youngest: Margarita (Margie), Hector, Edmundo (Mundie), Dora, Heliodoro (Junior, or Lolo) and of course the youngest of the family, me Ernesto (Neto or Ernie). I owe my oldest sister a lot of things: love and gratitude for one, but most importantly, I owe it to her to make a difference in other's lives, just like she made a difference in mine, my older brothers and one other sister.

When I first started thinking about this portion of my dissertation, I knew that the stories and recollections would be painful, emotional, and uplifting (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2007; Poulos, 2012a; Humphreys, 2005). The death of my mother at an early age was a significant obstacle for me. As I pondered more and more about the death of my parents, I realized two things. First, my mother's death feels more painful and close to me. For some reason, I have very few memories of my father's death or even days or weeks leading up to it. I simply don't remember much. Second, the story here is not about my mother's death but what it led to in my life. My mother's death was simply the catalyst for a life-altering change.

Margarita

The real life-changing story here is my sister Margarita (Margie) rising to the head of the family and taking care of me. Ellis, Dowrick, and Lloyd-Williams (2013) explain that when faced with a parent's death at an early age, there is a high probability that children will experience some adverse effects that could lead to substance abuse, vulnerability to depression, higher risk of criminal behavior, school underachievement, and lower employment rates unless these factors are mitigated by limiting disruption with continuity or semblance of normalcy, a robust social network and clear, open communication. Reflecting on those five possible adverse effects, I know that I have experienced all of them to varying degrees during my life. I have been fortunate to have had bold role models in my life. The deaths of my parents were indeed profound, but I was lucky that, in my case, my oldest sister's presence, guidance, and support minimized any disruption. The retelling of this part of my life, while painful, empowers me to reclaim control over the chaos and gives me the ability to build a positive sense of self (Kehily as cited in Pearce, 2010). My *colonia* offered a strong social network that provided me with access to teachings and learnings that my parents would have exposed me to during my early, formative years. I tell the story of my sister because she did things for the right reasons, out of love and commitment to her family. Like Guajardo et al. (2012), I learned many life lessons from my sister, and I continue to do so now as an adult.

The sudden death of my mother and the expected demise of my father certainly disrupted our lives. The oldest sibling at that time, my sister Margie, was nineteen; as the youngest, I was four years old. Ellis et al. (2013) theorize that discontinuity in the face of life-altering disruption can contribute to negative effects as adults. My siblings, chiefly, my sister Margie provided me a sense of continuity. My oldest sister shared with me that when I was young, in my elementary

years, I refused to get on the school bus and go to school. It was not that I did not like school; I did not want to go to school because I was afraid that when I came home, my sister would also be gone. Even now, thinking about this as an adult, my emotions tend to get the better of me. I am saddened not just for me but also for my siblings that also had to endure this, and I am happy for the fact that I had their support growing up but sad that I don't know if anyone supported them in the same fashion.

I have learned many things from my sister and family. In terms of my ontology, this struggle has helped make me the strong man that I am now. I believe that this specific challenge helped me overcome many different obstacles in my life. I have learned to persevere in the face of adversity, never to give up, and to always look for a way to survive. Following my father's death, it was up to my sister to figure out how to not only take care of us but also how to feed us. Luckily, there was a small, neighborhood store close by, and my sister explained our predicament to the owner and convinced him to give her groceries on credit. To this day, I will go out of my way to help strangers in a time of need, and my sister has had a hand in making me this way. As an educator, I am fond of saying that I am here to serve children, and I know that I learned that from my sister.

My sister has also been a hard critic and straight shooter my whole life, and as a surrogate parent prepared me for the many different challenges that life experiences would bring me (Guajardo et al., Spring 2012). She never holds back regardless of how what she says may hurt or make me feel. She never speaks out of malice, but always in a way to make me think reflectively and introspectively.

I can honestly say that there was something wrong with me when I completed my enlistment with the U.S. Army. I have always referred to the years following my army service as my "lost years" because I was essentially lost. I remember one event that shook me to my core. I was out drinking with a friend of mine, and we got into a car accident. Aside from a cut above my right eye, from smashing into the windshield, no one was seriously hurt. The following day my sister talked with me while my then-girlfriend (now my wife) was visiting.

Margie: "So, what happened?"

Me: "Joe and I were out partying, and we got into a car wreck."

Margie: "*Chingao Neto, te sales.* Seriously, you go overboard."

Me: "Yes, I know. I'm sorry."

Margie: *"Yo pensé que ibas a ser mejor que tus hermanos, pero eres igual."* "I thought you were going to be better than your brothers, but you're just the same."

I remember to this day the look my sister gave me as she told me those words. It wasn't anger or disgust, but disappointment. I had hurt and embarrassed the person that I pretty much owed everything to up to that point. It was a look and feel that I never want to experience again in my life. That day I learned a hard life lesson about what is important and valuable in life- I had lost my sister's respect. I know that is why part of my axiology flows in and around relationships and looking out for one another.

I have two critical takeaways from looking at my early years with my sister that has influenced me as an educator. One, as school personnel, part of our responsibility, is providing our students with a sense of continuity because some of our students' lives are in a state of constant flux and disruption. As educators, I believe it is our moral obligation to provide students as much stability as possible. We must make it part of our job, not just to know math and history;

we also must pay attention to and know students. When I was a principal, I remember attending a meeting with one of our grade-level teams to discuss ways that we could support our students beyond what we were doing. Some teachers were upset that a student was not completing homework and showing up to school without it, a major infraction at that time. There was a complete set of consequences for students that did not complete homework, with the most severe being that students had to stay after school to complete the homework they were missing and the homework for the day. Parents had to plan to pick up their children as we did not offer transportation for late pickups. In my mind, we were doing a good thing because we needed to teach students to be more responsible. However, what we were doing was indoctrinating students into a reward and punishment system, except that we were the only ones that saw the reward down the line- a better prepared, responsible young man or woman. When, in fact, what we wanted to do was fill up our students with what we deemed valuable (Yosso, 2005). Bohanan (2015), in quoting Tyre, Feuerborn, & Pierce) argues that the implementation of more restrictive policies leads to students feeling less safe, and that was the type system that we were building and implementing on our campus.

When our teachers called our student's mother to let her know that she would have to pick up her daughter, the mother tearfully told her that she had lost her job, her car was not working, and they did not have water or electricity. In the evening, her family walked down the street to a relative's home to shower and eat, so by the time they returned home, it was too dark for her children to get their homework completed.

In the grand scheme of things, homework was the last thing this child and her parents were worried about, and here we were demanding that they not only complete their homework, but also stay after school, and miss the school bus. If we had not called home, we would have

failed to serve that young girl and her siblings. The school day was probably the most normal part of her day, and we were robbing her and other students of it. Now, I always approach my work from the "what can I do to serve children and families" aspect, not what can children and families provide me.

The second thing I learned from my sister is that relationships and looking out for one another is extremely important. As I mentioned earlier, one of my biggest fears growing up was that I would end up homeless. I would worry that my sister would get fed up with me and kick me out of the house, and I would end up living on the streets. I now know that would never have happened, but it certainly kept me honest. That is a life lesson that I have carried with me throughout my career. In my mind, the way I will make my mark in the world is by ensuring that I am always looking out for others. As an educator, I continuously look for opportunities for people that work for me. I unashamedly have a soft spot for folks that share similar life experiences as me. I feel that I must help others get ahead in life. While my first focus is always on children, I also look out for adults.

During my first year as principal in my second go-round, I was leading a professional development for our staff that started with what we call journey lines. Journey lines are visual representations of your life that showcase highs and lows across your life. They were used to get

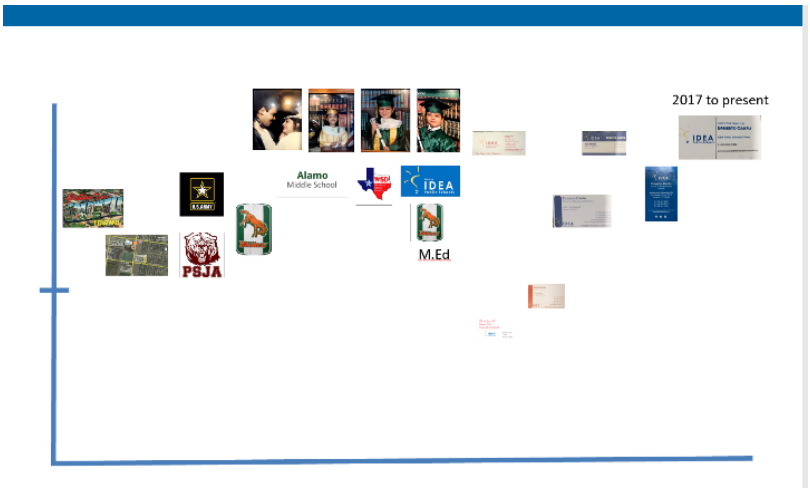


Figure 3 Cantu Journey Line

to know each other. I know now that these journey lines were autoethnographic because they showcased events in our lives that shaped our axiology and ontology.

We used this artistic approach to "build self-awareness and self-representations to promote voice and visibility among participants" (Finley, 2005, p. 684). As a principal, I always looked out for talent and ambition in my staff members, so I always asked participants to include where they saw themselves in the next five years. That year I had a brand new to our campus, one-year of experience teacher that when I asked her that question, she responded, "Mr. Cantu, in five years I see myself taking your job!" I loved and appreciated that comment. From that day on, we embarked on making that a possibility. She was promoted to Assistant Principal of Instruction (API) in her third year, and by her fourth year at IDEA Pharr, she had entered the Principal in Residence (PIR) program. She took over my role as principal in her fifth year at my campus when I was promoted to Vice President of Schools. Looking out for others and seeing them succeed makes me feel good about what I do. My sister taught me to value strong relationships and always look out for others; I know that it has served me well and that I am helping make a difference for children.

As an educator, this portion of my life has provided me with experiences, some wisdom, and a drive to serve others, especially children. Because of this, I will always be a champion for children everywhere, particularly *colonia* kids that are growing up as I did. So, who I am, my ontology is a person dedicated to serving children through education. Because of this, I value family, commitment, and perseverance.

It is hard to believe the power and authority that educators can wield. Harder still is the thought that some educators do not use this authority for the good or betterment of the children

they serve. I often remind leaders and teachers that our students spend more time with us than with their parents. As a young principal, and by young, I mean experience-wise, I had a policy that students should never be unattended. If they stayed after school, an adult or two should always be present. So, if students were on campus, that meant that an adult was on campus- we never left until someone knew that all students had arrived safely at home. Sometimes we stayed on campus very late, so I tried to get students home as quickly as possible, which was more challenging when we had after school activities.

At our school, we soon realized that some students were staying after school even if they did not have assigned activities or were participating in sports. I approached a group of these students, and I asked them, "Why did you all stay after school?

One of the students responded, "We just stayed after school, sir."

"But why," I asked again.

"*No mas*, sir. Just because."

"Why don't you all go home?" I asked, exasperated.

After all, at the root of the issue was the fact that I wanted to go home, and I could not do so until they had left and if they had just stayed after school that meant that parents might know about it or they had not made arrangements to get picked up.

One student responded, "*Para que sir, no ay nada que hacer en la casa*. Why go home sir, there is nothing to do at home."

I realized then that some of my students either did not have anything to at home or no one was home since most of my students' parents worked long hours. A study conducted in 2007

showed that students need positive connections and role models to increase positive behavior (Youngblade et al., 2007), and I was in a position to provide both. My choices were to let them stay and find something for them to do or run them off and hope they did not get into some sort of trouble because they would be unsupervised at home. Thompson (1997) points out that "a large part of our expectations for schools continues to be that they provide some of the support and servicing of the public sphere traditionally expected from the home" (p. 316). The choice was easy; look out for them even if it meant that my staff or I would have to stay at work later than usual. Not only did we provide them a purpose, a sense of belonging, and a haven, we showed our students that we genuinely cared for them. That is the moral and professional responsibility of an educator.

First-grader with a knife

When I was in first grade, I took a pocketknife to school, and if that was not bad enough, I threatened another student with it. At seven years old, I was exhibiting a higher risk of criminal behavior and school underachievement that Ellis et al. (2103) state is prevalent in children that experience early parental death. I was fortunate that the adults around me comprehended that the situation was beyond a school or criminal infraction. I know now that that incident had a lasting effect on me because it reemphasizes for me that working with children, educators must consider all possible factors that may be contributing to children's social, emotional, and academic development.

> While sitting on the bus, the boy kept sliding his right hand over his pocket to make sure it was still there. He had decided to take a small pocketknife to school for no apparent reason other than wanting to show it off to his friends. That morning, before class standing behind a partition, he excitedly showed it to his friends. Later, during recess, one

of the other boys related how this other student, a white student, had pushed another one of their classmates to the ground. Quickly, the boy decided to confront the culprit with the knife in hand. The threat was simple.

"Leave Joe alone," the boy said while brandishing the knife. Luckily for both, it was just a threat followed by, "You better not tell anybody!"

The young victim, however, did report the incident to an adult.

Even though that incident happened almost forty-five years ago, I still remember it quite clearly and realize just how lucky I was not to have acted further. I do not remember the name of the boy nor what he looked like, but I do remember our elementary principal, Mr. Z, and his saving grace. I think my teacher also had something to do with me getting off with a stern talking to at the time. I recall my teacher whispering to Mr. Z and looking at me. If my math is correct, this incident happened about a year after my father had passed away. I know that my teacher knew about my situation because I had begged her to attend my sister's wedding-which she had. I know that she interceded for me with our principal. I know my tendency has always been to recognize that we must look beyond the classroom when we are educating our children and come to terms with everything that may be affecting their well-being. That is why autoethnography is valuable for an educator. Starr (2010) explains that autoethnography "is not the literal study of the self but the space between the self and practice" (p. 2). It is this in-between space that forms our axiology and ontology. Humphreys (2005), in agreeing with Ellis and Bochner, explains that autoethnography "stimulates more discussion of working between the spaces of subjectivity and objectivity" (p. 853). Autoethnography is the bridge over those spaces.

U.S. Army

I am a proud U.S. Army combat veteran. I served three years and a couple of months, mostly overseas in West Germany, and the middle east during Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm. The army taught me many things about being a responsible adult, but most importantly, I feel that it offered me a way out. Joining the U.S. Army was one of the smartest decisions I ever made in my life. In addition to gaining life-long skills, I received college financial assistance in the form of the G.I. Bill and the College Fund.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Uncle Sam and the many men and women that I served with during my enlistment, especially my first sergeant at my first official unit. He was a surly older man, a Vietnam veteran that still operated under the old army code that he had grown up within his over twenty years of service. Years later, in the way of apology, he told me, "Cantu, that was the only army I knew." I had met up with him and his wife outside of Denver, some thirty years after I had proudly served with him in Charlie Battery 3/17 Field Artillery in Ansbach, West Germany. I was regaling them with stories from our time together in West Germany; to be honest, he was a hard character. I excitedly shared these stories not to paint him as an antagonist in my story but illustrate that I had gained strength from him to endure what anything that came my way. The organic knowledge that Gonzalez and Padilla (2008) state we get from our family and community and that we use to create strategies for the public good manifested itself in me through my First Sergeant as a surrogate family member and the U.S Army as my community.

First Sergeant was especially hard on me because not only was I Mexican American, but I was also his namesake. He had asked me in Spanish during one of our many inspections, *"Sabes por qué soy más duro contigo?* Do you know why I am harder on you?"

"Si primer sargento, porque soy Mexicano. Yes, first sergeant, because I am Mexican".

*"*Goddamn right*, somos mejores"* "We're better!"

I am sure that the Vietnam War and his life in the Army made him into the no-nonsense kind of man that he is, and I appreciate what I learned from him. He was a small man that everyone respected, and most men feared.

The most important lesson I learned from him was, "know where you are supposed to be at all times." I learned that lesson the hard way. I was new to the country. I had only been in West Germany for about two weeks, and like all new soldiers to the unit had to meet with the battalion sergeant major for a briefing. I was late to the meeting by about five minutes, and while technically not my fault, I was late nonetheless- an unacceptable mistake. Sergeant major looked at me and simply asked, "What unit are you with soldier?'

"Charlie Battery sergeant major," I said, standing at parade rest.

"Ok, sit down," he responded.

Wow, I thought that wasn't so bad. I sat down and listened intently to everything sergeant major had to say. After the briefing, I headed back to my barracks, which was a short walk away. I came up the stairs and headed to my room, which was right next to the entrance on the first floor. I had just walked in when I heard our first sergeant yell, "Cantu, get your ass out here!" I quickly headed to his office, which luckily (or unluckily) for me, was right in front of the entrance next to my room. As soon as he saw me, he yelled, "You've got ten seconds to get up to the fourth floor!"

"Excuse me first sergeant?" I stammered.

“Now, get your ass up there!”

I took off, running up the stairs. First Sergeant calmly walked up the stairs counting down, “ten, nine, eight, seven…”

I made it to the fourth floor before he got to one. As I doubled over to catch my breath, he also arrived on the fourth floor, sauntered over and very calmly, told me, “You have five seconds to get down to the basement.” I took off running like a wild man, knowing that there was absolutely no way I would make it down five floors, but I had to try no matter what. When the countdown got to one. First sergeant yelled, “Stop, get down and give me ten.”

The thing is that when it comes to pushups in the army, ten means forty, because the count goes: one, two, three, one, one, two, three, two, one, two, three, three, all the way until ten. As soon as I finished my ten count, he shouted at me again, this time, “You have four seconds to get up to the third floor.” Which of course, I did not make again, which again resulted in more pushups on the stairs. I don’t recall how many times I ran up those stairs or how many pushups I did, but I do know that it seemed like it was forever and a day. At the point that I was reeling and ready to pass out, my section chief interceded for me. “Hey first sergeant.”

“What?” First Sergeant replied.

Glancing at me, my chief said, “I think he’s had enough.”

First Sergeant angrily looked at me, finally noticing my physical state, and looking intently at me said, “Maybe now you will know where you’re supposed to be at all times.”

Figure 4 First Sergeant and E.C.

I would love to say that I have not been late for a meeting in thirty years, but that is not true. What is true is that I always strive to be early and always over-prepared for any meeting and in life and work, which is vital for educators as we must deal with ever-changing situations regularly.

I learned many things during my service in the U.S. Army that built my character and that I have been able to apply to my work in education; the easiest way to sum this up is always to be cool, calm, and collected. One young staff member, Joe, commented to me one time during a particularly stressful situation, “Mr. Cantu, how do you do it? I never see you stressed.”

I replied, “Joe, as the principal on this campus, you all look to me first and imagine if I didn’t at least appear calm? How would you all feel?”

“Well, I guess we would all be freaking out.”

“Exactly.”

The leader must be a rock, no matter the situation, and the U.S. Army helped build that in me. Who we are is developed by teaching and modeling (Starr, 2010). What I have learned in my lifetime, I have attempted to model for others. That and the fact that I have been in live combat contribute to my development. In combat, a careless, stressed leader can get men or himself

killed. While folks may not die on a campus due to a stressed leader, the school will suffer from a demoralized staff, and by extension, so will students. I approach my work as an optimist and operate in a solutions-oriented frame of mind. Patterson and Kelleher (2005) make a case for optimism by arguing that optimists always see opportunities in challenges and maintain confidence in themselves and their abilities. Life has knocked me down several times, but I have always bounced back. Life experiences have given me the fortitude.

He's a loser from *Las Milpas*

In August 1991, after three years in the Army and almost nine months in the deserts of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Kuwait, I completed my term of enlistment and ETS'd (expiration-term of serviced) out of the Army. After three years away from my family, living overseas, and in the desert, I finally headed home to South Texas and *Las Milpas.*

My first few years since my enlistment were rough for me. I had very little sense of direction and quite simply did not care about anything- not even myself. To this day, I know that I have made two brilliant decisions in my life: one, joining the U.S. Army; and two, getting married. I know that those two events saved my life and put me on a different path.

My wife, Cindy, and I have been married for over twenty-five years and been together on and off since I was a sophomore in high school. I can say, and I know she will agree that it has not been easy, but we have always made a go of it and push past our challenges. I have grown to love her father after many years, but it has not always been easy. I know that he has always respected me, but I do not think he always liked me, and that is ok. As a father myself, I know that no one will ever be good enough for my kids (Pearce, 2010).

I have been fighting the stigma of being a *colonia* kid my whole life, and I still do so for kids that are growing up as I did. There was a point in my relationship with my in-laws that I did not care for them either. There was a particular incident that distresses me because, as I mentioned earlier, I have grown to not only respect my father in law but also to love him, so dwelling on this is painful and brings up memories of always having to prove myself to others. There are many benefits to researching your own life, but there are also emotional and mental demands (Pearce, 2010), and this situation falls into that category.

> My girlfriend and I had been arguing all day over what I considered nonsense. Our discussion got heated and to the point where she started crying while we were on the phone. In the background, I heard her father say, "*Déjalo, es basura de Las Milpas*. He's a loser. Leave him. He's trash from *Las Milpas*." We continued to argue, and I remember being more upset about the comment her father had made than our actual argument. Once again, someone could not look past where I came from; I was being judged on geography rather than on character. In my mind, no matter what I did, being a *colonia* kid would always be a mark against me, and I had to prove them and everyone else wrong.

I realize now that while in my mind I was not a loser because I had potential and was a college student, to my future father-in-law, the only thing that mattered to him was seeing his daughter hurting and upset. That is the biggest lesson that I learned. It reaffirmed for me that nothing is more important than *familia,* and regardless of the situation or the antagonist, nothing should come before your family. That is something that I have strived to instill not only in my children but in my students and staff members. As an educator, if you cannot take care of your kids first, then you cannot take care of anyone else's children.

IDEA Public Schools

In 2003 I met the co-founder of IDEA Public Schools in a master's course at the University of Texas-Pan American. I showed up with my resume to our second-class session and told her I was looking for part-time work. I was a certified teacher working with Windham ISD at Lopez State Jail in Edinburg, Texas. Windham ISD is the biggest district in the state of Texas, as it encompasses the entire state. Windham ISD is found in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) system and provides GED classes for inmates to reduce recidivism. I had a great work schedule at that time: class start time was 4:45 AM, and I was done teaching by noon. My wife, in her infinite wisdom, decided that I had too much free time on my hands, so I should look for part-time employment, which I did.

I started at IDEA Public Schools that August as a tutor for what was called West Wing. Our campus West Wing was designed to ensure that students completed their homework. Students that did not complete their homework had to stay after school to complete all missing homework, plus any new assignments. West Wing also provided support for students that struggled to complete homework assignments either due to academic challenges, lack of structure, or lack of support. Like the White House west wing that never shuts down during a national crisis, West Wing at our campus did not shut down either. I often found myself working late into the evenings, helping students complete assignments, which was great for my family and me as we were living on a single income at that time but challenging nonetheless because of the late hours. That semester I became the go-to guy for extra work. You need someone to tutor 6th-grade math? I'm your man. There is a need for someone that can teach adult ESL (English as a Second Language) part-time in the evenings? I'm ESL certified. What about tutoring Algebra on Saturday mornings? Put me in coach. As a part-time employee, I became part of the team and

family by showcasing that I was not afraid of hard work and, more importantly, I was there for students. Honestly, my drive for serving students, my axiology, had not solidified itself yet.

A few months into the fall semester of 2003, the IDEA Public Schools founder, JoAnn Gama, approached me about interviewing for a permanent position at IDEA Donna, teaching 6th-grade math. Even though I had majored in history and minored in English, I was first drawn to teaching math while teaching at Windham ISD; I had forced myself to learn that subject because my students historically struggled with the math component of the GED exam. While going into this part-time job, I had never intended to make the jump into the charter school world; I fell in love with the ideals, structure, and mission of the school. At this time, IDEA Public Schools had only been in existence since 2000 and had only one campus, the original or flagship campus located in Donna, Texas, that served approximately 600 students. The clincher for me was my conversation with JoAnn:

"Ernie, would you consider working for us full-time next year?" She asked.

"I hadn't been considering it, JoAnn. I have a great job working with the state."

"Well, our Hispanic students need more positive role models in their lives."

How could I say no to that argument? In fact, up to that moment, I had never seen myself as a role model for students. Even though, as an educator, I was a role model, that concept was not part of my ontology yet. So, in August of 2004, I became IDEA Donna's only 6th-grade math teacher.

You're not from *Las Milpas*

My first year at IDEA Public Schools helped hone my true calling. It was at this time that I realized that my job was in service of children and that it was up to me to make a difference in my students' lives that went beyond teaching them addition and subtraction. One of the most appealing things about working at IDEA Public Schools was on the mission of college for all. The belief and mission at that time and even more so now, seventeen years later has been on making sure that 100% of students matriculate to a university or four-year college. I had never experienced an environment like that where most staff members all believed in and worked toward the same thing.

Before IDEA Public Schools, I had been dedicated to my work and my career, but not to the extent or intensity that I experienced at IDEA Donna. I came on as a full-time employee in August of 2004 after a year of part-time work. I became the 6th-grade math teacher for about 120 students from differing backgrounds and areas. The great thing about an open-enrollment charter school is that they are not zone-specific. Families, regardless of where they live, choose to attend. In my 6th grade, I had students from as many as five different neighboring cities. I enjoyed my first-year teaching at IDEA because I learned about instruction, leadership, and commitment to excellence. That first year catapulted me into educational leadership. It helped sharpen my focus on serving children not only because it was part of my job but because I realized that I had a moral obligation to help children that not only looked like me, but that was growing up the way I did in impoverished conditions.

I always enjoyed talking to my students about my life experiences as a way of showing them that we often hold the key to our destinies in our own hands. Sparkes (2000) states that we often use personal narratives as a means of extending sociological understanding. As an

educator, I often used personal anecdotes or stories to create an understanding of my culture and ontology (Holt, 2003). I have always used stories of teaching and building pride, and as such, I took opportunities to talk about my life to my students when opportunities presented themselves. My stories also helped build bridges and connections between my students and myself (Lockford, 2014). Like Trostin (2013), my teaching often took a life of its own and became more dynamic, and I usually let the spirit move me as I excitedly regaled my students with stories from my life. Now I consider whether rather than the "spirit" moving me, it was my students with their curious questions designed to distract me from the day's lesson. Regardless, I have always enjoyed telling a good story, and I have utilized my personal experiences in class and education, both formal and informal, to drive my approaches to instruction and pedagogy (Hughes et al., 2012). My students have also taught me many things, and in this case, one of my students helped shape my axiology and ontology.

> We were discussing life choices, and how life is choice-driven, and one wrong choice can have adverse effects on the rest of your life. I was telling my students about growing up in *Las Milpas* and how my decision to join the U.S. Army changed my life because it allowed me to explore life outside of the *colonia.* Still, more importantly, it gave me a way out by providing me the financial means to a college degree when one of my students suddenly yelled out, "You're not from *Las Milpas*!"
>
> I responded, "What do you mean; I'm not from *Las Milpas*. Of course, I am."
>
> She looked at me and quite seriously, stated, "Because you're a teacher."

In her mind, teachers could not be from *Las Milpas*. I was shocked when I realized that she could not come to terms with being educated, having a career, and being from a *colonia*. I could not

come to terms with the power and privilege that my degree afforded me as a teacher (Popova, 2016) because this was still a foreign concept to my students. Quite possibly, I was seen as an outsider because, as Boylorn (2014) recounts up to that point, I also had been writing and telling my stories in ink only I could see. My college degree and chosen profession characterized me as an in-between, neither here nor there, an insider yet an outsider as well (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2004), but I forged forward building my bridge.

If I could put a pinpoint into the timeline of my life in education, I would place one at that exact moment and title it "Becoming who I am." That moment changed my axiology and my ontology- that epiphany was my wake-up call to my purpose (Chapman-Clarke, 2016). That moment changed who I was. I went from someone showing up at work, to someone committed to a mission of serving children and I valued making a difference in this world more than just getting a paycheck or having an excellent retirement plan. I know that it is far more important to be relevant in this world, and my relevance revolves around serving children.

This moment in my career brings me both joy and concern. I am glad that I experienced this epiphany because it changed my approach to my work and serving children in such a way that even now, almost sixteen years later, it drives what I do. On the other hand, I realize that the seven years before working at IDEA Public Schools, I was an educator elsewhere and was not driven by seeing children, or in the case of Windham ISD, adult students succeed. Instead, I feel I was just punching a clock, and that saddens me because I failed those students. I did not know or understand that my purpose went beyond teaching grammar or fractions, and instead, I provide students opportunities to succeed. While I realize this sounds arrogant, I can honestly say that I am truly driven by seeing others, especially students, achieve.

Several years later, I received a letter of appreciation (Appendix B) from a student that I had taught at IDEA Donna, a classmate of the student in this story. I appreciate the simple words of gratitude because it reaffirms and validates my research and my life's work. My former student expresses appreciation and enjoyment for the "war stories" I shared and that he thought of me as a drill sergeant teaching math with a smile. This message is powerful for me because my former student wrote it when he was a senior in high school, getting ready to graduate. He wrote a letter to a person that had made a difference in his life, and while I am happy that he chose me, I am much happier knowing that I made a difference in this young man's life.

IDEA Frontier

IDEA Public Schools is a nationally recognized charter school management organization and, as of 2020, operates ninety schools serving over 54,000 students in South Texas, San Antonio, Austin, Tarrant County, El Paso, and Louisiana. I have the distinction of being one of the four launching principals that opened campuses outside of Donna, Texas. I also have the distinction of being the first principal to lead an IDEA campus to an unacceptable rating within the Texas education accountability system during my first year as principal. I was the first IDEA principal to be removed from his or her position as well. All this within my first two years of principalship. Over the past seventeen years, I have had to work hard to overcome and persevere not only in life but in my educational career as well, and I will never forget the day I stepped down as principal.

I was working closely with my manager on addressing the challenges that my school was facing at the time. It was my second year as principal following a disappointing year of unacceptable student academic results. My manager asked me to meet her to go over the schedule for the upcoming semester. It was the week before Thanksgiving, and I recall thinking

to myself, “Man, it would suck if I were to get fired right now,” as I drove the forty-five miles between Brownsville and Weslaco.

As soon as I sat down across from my manager, she asked me, “How are you feeling?”

“Feeling good. How are you?” I replied.

“Hey, what do you think about moving to a different position? Something where your skills can be utilized better?” she asked.

“What do you mean, not be principal anymore?” I stammered.

“I think you would be better in a different position. It’s called the Director of New Site Development, and you would oversee finding sites for new schools and assisting in setting them up. Like you did at IDEA Frontier.” She quickly dove in.

“Wow, you’re asking me to give up the school that I helped build from the ground up.”

I looked at her intently, and I realized I did not have a choice. It was either take the position that was being offered or be out of a job.

To make matters worse, I had to stand in front of my staff to tell them that I was taking a new role in the organization because the drive from San Juan where I lived to Brownsville where I worked coupled with the long hours was taking a toll on my family and me. That was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do in my life. I felt like I was betraying my staff and my students and my ideals as well. Years later, a colleague of mine and I were discussing this tumultuous time in my life, and he asked me, “Ernesto, how could you stay and keep working for this organization. I mean, don’t you have any pride?”

I remember responding, “Yes, I have pride, but I didn’t have time for pride at that time because I also had a family, a mortgage, and bills that needed to get paid. I had to set aside my pride.” Much like Ellis (2009), I have learned to not always respond to critiques but to be open to learning from them, and I learned that perception is often reality, whether I accept it or not.

At that time, I felt embarrassed and betrayed by my organization, but I realize now that it was the right thing to do. This autoethnography is my attempt at what Poulos (2012b) describes as narrative healing regardless of what I face; I know that I must get through to the other side. I write about and reflect on this experience so that I can move forward (Trostin, 2013).

As a first-year principal, I could not figure out how to fix the issues I faced. Reflecting on that era of my life, I know that I was not a strong principal; I was not an instructional leader. If I was not helping kids, then I was hurting them, and I should not be in that position. I spent the next three and a half years working my way back into an instructional role because that was my dream, and I knew that I could contribute to the development of children. Because I wanted to be an instructional leader, I refused to be cast into a role I did not want. Years later, I approach my work with a greater sense of pride because I know that I have persevered, and I can do it again if I needed to do so. While this time in my life was one of my most challenging, it helped forge me into a more durable person and educator. I have become both a visionary and the executioner of that vision.

As educators, we cannot leave anything to chance and must plan appropriately for many different circumstances. There is an unfortunate side to this learning experience as well, as I have become more untrusting and looked for conspiracies behind motives for a long time until my ontology grew and strengthened around my confidence. As I became more proficient in my

work, my confidence grew and solidified around the knowledge that I brought value and expertise to our organization and that my skills were marketable.

IDEA Frontier shaped my time at axiology. I emerged valuing perseverance, stability, and loyalty. To this day, I look to those values as a guiding force in the work that I do, especially when it comes to hiring staff. I often refer to this as having the right mindset, focused on overcoming obstacles, being of a steady demeanor, and loyal or committed to what we do in serving children. My time after IDEA Frontier was a particularly trying time in my professional and personal life, but it taught me to value myself and, more importantly, to believe in myself.

I have worked hard to get to where I am now. My trajectory is a model for growth and advancement at IDEA Public Schools; I have been a tutor, teacher, Assistant Principal of Operations, principal-twice, Director of New Site Development, VP of Schools, and now Executive Director.

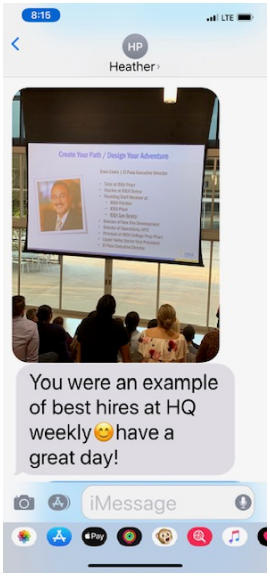


Figure 5 Hiring Example Text

Twenty years trying to get out

After my move from principal at IDEA Frontier, I transitioned to an operational role at another of our launching campuses, IDEA San Benito. As the Assistant Principal of Operations (APO), I was responsible for running the campus operations teams so that our principals could prioritize instruction. IDEA San Benito was still quite a drive away from my home in San Juan, Texas, so in 2009 after two years on that campus, I asked for a transfer to one of our new schools. In 2010 IDEA Public Schools was opening two new campuses; one in Alamo, Texas,

and the second one in Pharr, Texas, or, more specifically, my old *colonia*, *Las Milpas*. I had already contacted the founding principal at IDEA Alamo, and we had agreed that Alamo would be my next assignment within our organization; our founder, JoAnn Gama, had a different idea.

When I approached her about transferring to a campus nearer to my home, she agreed that I could/should transfer, but she didn't want me to move to Alamo, but rather to Pharr. I recall our conversation went something like this:

JoAnn: "Ernie, we are going to let you transfer, but not to Alamo. We want you to transfer to Pharr instead."

Me: "JoAnn, I spent twenty years trying to get out of that *colonia*, and you all want to put me back in there."

Things happen for a reason. In 2010, for the third time during my tenure at IDEA Public Schools, I was on a new campus founding team, but this time I was back in my old neighborhood. My life, both personal and professional, has been intricately interwoven with *Las Milpas*. I started my life there and still have close ties to the community, not just because of my family or friends that still live there, but because it has come to mean something more to me. It is a proof point for what can be and has helped hone a deep sense of commitment and community (Guajardo, et al., 2012).

After a year, our founding principal decided to return to his hometown, which unknowingly to me, created an opportunity. I thought that I would never get a chance at IDEA to run a campus again; however, thanks to other colleagues that openly advocated for me, I was allowed to interview for the position. At the crux of it, ~~it~~ was my refusal to accept my shortcomings as principal at IDEA Frontier; I repeatedly and loudly blamed my previous

manager when the answer always lay within me. As a leader, whether something is your fault or not, it is your fault. I had failed my students at IDEA Frontier because I was personally unprepared to lead, coach, or manage teachers, and I blamed others. It took me three years to come to terms with the fact that I was ultimately responsible for everything that did or did not happen on my campus. Once I accepted this, it made all the difference in the world for me.

I did have to work my way back into the instructional side of running a campus. I did this by taking every opportunity I encountered to show that I was an instructional leader but, more importantly, by focusing on my growth in that area. At IDEA San Benito I taught model lessons for new teachers, designed, and implemented an intervention program that would serve as a springboard for the district and lead to more significant gains for our students.

¡Arriba Las Milpas!

As an APO at Pharr, I helped the founding principal by running campus operations, and also supporting instruction. Initially, I tutored a group of ninth-grade Algebra students- a subject that I had struggled with in college. Eventually, I took over as de facto Algebra teacher and taught regular classes during the week and tutored my students during afterschool and Saturday tutorials. By the end of the school year, I was pretty much the grade-level team leader. In 2011, in our first year of existence, with 145 students in 6th grade and 68 students in 9th-grade IDEA, Pharr College Preparatory received a Texas State Accountability rating of Recognized (2011 *campus* AEIS+Report, n.d.). It was IDEA Pharr's first year as a school, and our students were already proving the possible. Ninety-four percent of our students were Hispanic, 93.8% economically disadvantaged, with 61.8% considered Limited English Proficiency (LEP); the majority of our students were from the *Las Milpas* area or lived across the border in Reynosa,

Tamaulipas. It didn't matter where you lived or your background; what mattered was how much work you were willing to put into being successful.

For my interview, I prepared myself for two anticipated questions that I had wrestled with for over three years: What happened at IDEA Frontier? What changes would you make if you were named principal? "For three years, I have been asking myself that question; while it has been challenging, I have learned that at the end of the day, as the hiring and firing manager, I did not make decisions that I needed to make. I know that everything rolls up to me, so if I were principal at IDEA Pharr, I would approach my work in this way." I promised myself that I would always approach my work, mindful of the fact that children depended on me.

I was offered the job of principal at IDEA Pharr in June 2011. That has been one of my most significant points of pride. I was the principal of a school that I helped launch, located in the same *colonia* where I grew up. Several of my childhood friends or acquaintances enrolled their children at my campus, not necessarily because of me, but because we were building a solid reputation for hard work, high expectations with reliable results. Being principal at this campus became more than a job for me. I realized that my calling was to serve children that looked like me and were growing up like me-this was my epiphany. Chapman-Clarke (2016) posits that while epiphanies often serve as a wake-up call, they sometimes can also be traumatic because they also bring to light what is holding us back. The principalship at IDEA Pharr was my second opportunity at being a true instructional leader; more importantly, because our school was in *Las Milpas*, it was personal for me. I needed to show that I could do the work of leading campus and that I could do it well. I have deep roots in *Las Milpas*. I share those roots of my political and personal connections to the area as a bridge between who I was growing up in my *colonia* and the dedicated educator I am today. I am proud of being from *Las Milpas*, prouder still because

despite being from *Las Milpas*, and I would say because I am from *Las Milpas*, I was proving the possible and, more importantly, contributing to the well-being of others.

"*Arriba Las Milpas.* Up with *Las Milpas*" became our staff and students' rallying cry. We were committed to building pride in our community despite the stigma of being *colonia* kids. That became my signature tagline after one of our parents, excited about my vision for our campus, shouted it out during a parent info session. The pride and enthusiasm that the mother displayed reminded me of just how great of a community we had in *Las Milpas*.

My staff and I worked hard to create a culture of hard work, no excuses and caring at IDEA Pharr that led to success and pride in our school and community. In 2013 the state of Texas instituted a new facet to state accountability that rewarded schools with earned distinctions in up to seven categories. That year, due to our size, we qualified and earned three distinctions in Reading/ELA, Mathematics, and Top 25 Percent: Student progress (TAPR, 2012-13). The following year, we earned seven out of seven distinctions in Reading/ELA, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Top 25 Percent: Student Progress, Top 25 Percent: Closing Performance Gaps, and Post-Secondary Readiness. I am proud to say that out of 462 students, 461 (99.8%) were Hispanic, and 445 (96.3%) were classified as economically disadvantaged (TAPR, 2013-14), and it didn't matter. I knew our students were as smart as any other students regardless of where they were from and that they could achieve as much if not more than their peers.

The photo I have included as one of my artifacts shows my staff and me the day that we received the news that our campus had earned seven out of seven distinctions in state accountability. At IDEA Public School's Back to School Bash, every employee in the organization partakes in a celebration honoring the previous year's accomplishments and setting the vision for the upcoming school year. It was an honor to receive the news in front of thousands of IDEA employees. One of my brothers, Edmundo, works for IDEA Public Schools; I am proud that he was able to see not only the culmination of my work but the culmination of my students' and staff's work. I was able to show that if you put your mind to it, you can accomplish many things. I am proud to have been a role model for our community. It is an honor knowing that our staff and community cared about students and their growth and their success. It reminds me to stay humble but to be proud, nonetheless.

Figure 6 Arriba Las Milpas Back to School Bash

In terms of my axiology and ontology, my time at IDEA Pharr solidified my belief in community, perseverance, and reminds me to value hard work, teamwork, and building strong relationships. I reflect on those days, realizing that I was not a taskmaster for my staff, but rather a guide. I set the vision and goals and, more importantly, let them lead. Our team believed in students and our mission, and they knew that working together, we could accomplish anything.

One in one hundred

While I have always aspired to motivate, inspire, and be a good role model for my students and staff, I am most proud when my students motivate and inspire each other and when they inspire me. Traditional educational research dictates that teachers are the main influencers and socializers (Nurmi & Kiuru, 2015); however, students also impact and influence educators.

During a particularly rough day at work, I was headed out of my school building feeling dejected and defeated when one of our teachers called me into his classroom. As I walked into his class, he turned to one student, Josie, and asked her, "Josie, what does one in one hundred mean to you?'

The student promptly replied, "One in one hundred means that out of every one hundred students that start elementary school, only one will earn a doctorate, and you are that one, Mr. Cantu."

What that student and teacher did not know was that that very day I had decided to pause my doctoral studies. I know that things happen for a reason; luckily, fate or a higher power put that student in my path that day. While I still have not completed my doctorate, it is students like Josie that drive me to continue. In 2017 Josie graduated from IDEA Pharr as valedictorian and matriculated to Harvard. She was a first-generation college-goer from her family, from *Las Milpas*, a founding 6th-grade student, and a member of the IDEA Pharr's first graduating class.

Several years later, I invited Josie to speak at a professional development session titled New Team and Family Orientation to show my new staff what is possible. By this time, July 2020, I was already the Executive Director for IDEA El Paso, a new region that I launched in 2019, and I wanted to show our newest members of the IDEA El Paso a proof point for our mission of college for all. Josie spoke about her time at IDEA Pharr, how teachers had motivated her, plus all the hard work that she had to put in to make it Harvard.

As part of her closing, she shared, “And finally, I’d like to thank Mr. Cantu, for inviting me to El Paso, for always believing in me, and for being an exceptional role model. If there is anyone that has taught me the value of investing in your community and seeking to better it, it is Mr. Cantu” (Vera, 2019).

Students like Josie will change the world and improve neighborhoods and *colonias* across our nation. It is up to us to teach, inspire, and guide them in that process. When we think about change, we typically think about change coming in from the outside, but either that will not work, or it will take too long. However, if we start from the inside, we can help transformation happen quicker and more efficiently. IDEA Pharr graduated 85 students in 2017, with most of them from *Las Milpas* and first-generation college-goers. Before they graduated, we made sure that students had a deep sense of pride in themselves and their community. When students feel a deep connection to their *colonia* and continue to live and work in the area after they graduate from college, they will not only raise the income level but also become advocates for education. They will grow into solid role models for their younger siblings and friends.

Promotion

In the Spring of 2015, I received a text from our Superintendent and co-founder JoAnn inquiring about whether I was interested in applying for a Vice President of School's position that had opened in our organization. The chief responsibility consisted of directly managing school principals. The closest job in a traditional school district would be Assistant Superintendent. My initial reaction and response were a “thank you, I am honored, but I am

happy as principal at IDEA Pharr, and I want to see my founding students graduate." I had been at that campus for five years, with our founding 6th graders who were now in 10th grade.

Her response was, "That is exactly what I was hoping you would say because you are committed to your students and *Las Milpas*, but the organization needs someone like you in this role."

So, after much hesitation, I decided to apply and interview for the role and was promoted that year. I took on some of the VP of Schools responsibilities while still principal and slowly transitioned my duties as principal to our Principal in Residence. The following school year, I started my new job managing two principals, and by January 2016, I had taken on a more significant portfolio and managing seven principals.

My promotion was the third time that JoAnn had inspired me to do something different and bigger in our organization. I have been lucky and blessed to have had her as a manager and mentor during my time at IDEA Public Schools. I have learned many things from her, but the most important thing I have learned has been to push, motivate, and inspire those around you to do something that they do not think they can do. As mentioned in chapter 3, I have always suffered from imposter syndrome, always thinking that I am not smart enough or good enough to do something, but JoAnn has always motivated me beyond what I thought was possible.

For that reason, I try to emulate her in motivating and placing folks in positions of leadership when I see the potential. I always tell my direct reports to be empowered to make decisions if they keep two things top of mind: one, no one is going to get hurt. Always think safety, and two, nothing illegal or immoral. If a decision turns out to be a mistake, as long as it is within those two parameters, we can address it. The important thing is to lead. I have learned that

I must trust my direct reports because there is just no way that I can do all the work. As educational leaders, we must invest the time and energy in building those around us, and sometimes it takes more than just building technical skills; we must also build confidence.

Viva El Paso

In November 2016, I began the work of launching and leading a new expansion region for IDEA Public Schools. Moving to El Paso was one of the hardest things I have ever done. I never imagined myself living outside of the Rio Grande Valley. It was a tough sell for my family, as well. My oldest daughter, Alyssa was about to be a senior at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley; my middle daughter, Klarissa, would be a senior in high school (IDEA Pharr); and my son was still a sophomore also at IDEA Pharr. One of my brothers told me that I should not do it because there were still plenty of kids in the Rio Grande Valley that I could help without leaving South Texas. I was also worried about my sister Margie as she was getting older.

My brother-in-law Beto, Margie's husband, and my surrogate father, provided me some words of wisdom that convinced me that I should and could take on the job. He stressed the fact that while being close to each other was important, it should not get in the way of me taking on a new role. Especially if that is what I wanted to do, he reminded me that if something were going to happen to them or anyone else, it would happen whether I was in the Rio Grande Valley or El Paso. Unfortunately, something did happen while I was in El Paso- my brother in law passed away. While this continues to hurt to this day, I am happy that he witnessed me become a teacher, principal, VP, and Executive Director.

I transitioned fully to my new role as executive director in January 2017. As a new Executive Director, my main responsibility was to establish brand new schools from the ground

up. My main duties included site identification/procurement, construction (somewhat), and, most importantly, recruiting both staff and students. Our growth plan called for a five-year plan where we would launch and operate twenty schools by 2023, starting in 2018 with two sites, four schools. Followed by one more site in 2019 and 2020 with four schools. After that, we would add two sites and four schools each year until we have 20 schools serving over 10,000 students by 2023.

An open invitation and a pledge of ten million dollars from a local El Paso organization comprised of business leaders called the Council on Regional Economic Expansion and Educational Development (CREEED) brought IDEA Public Schools, my family, and me to El Paso. I would most certainly have felt like a carpet bagger coming in to try and take advantage of a precarious situation if not for that invitation. CREEED invited IDEA Public Schools as part of their 60x30 initiative, modeled on the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's 60X30 plan, which pushed for sixty percent of Texans having a two-year certification or four-year degree by 2030 (THECB *60x30TX*, n.d.). CREEED's commitment focused on higher educational attainment for all El Pasoans, because only 17% of El Paso eighth-graders were attaining a two-year certification or four-year degree (*CREEED 60x30 El Paso*, n.d.).

As we expanded into the region with a media campaign and my focus on meeting and building social and professional connections, I made sure that our message and mine was always that we were in El Paso to serve children first and foremost. Our communication never included imperialistic language centered on "we are here to save you or your children because you can't," instead, I opted always to take the high road and focus on serving children. Regardless of what others were saying about IDEA El Paso, we stayed true to our convictions.

As I hired a team, I trained them on our talking points that always revolved around what we offered and never disparaged any of the local nine school districts serving approximately 180,000 students (*County of El Paso, Texas - Economic Development*, n.d.). I wanted to control our narrative and its telling, just as I control the narrative of this autoethnography. Pathak (2010) points out that in rebelling against academic and social-imperialism, I am creating my form of imperialism by saying that I must tell this story, and I knowingly and wholeheartedly accept that.

Meeting local district leaders

As part of my duties, I knew that while I may not be working closely with any of the local traditional school districts, I still wanted to have cordial, professional relationships with local superintendents. Most people fell into one of three camps: anti-charter, pro-charter, or neutral. If they were anti-charter, I would try to move them to neutral by emphasizing that we were there to serve children. This approach did not always work, but by sharing my life story, including growing up in a *colonia* as a proof point that I was in education for the right reasons, I sometimes moved them to be pro-Ernie Cantu or at least not anti-Ernie Cantu by the end of the meeting. That approach worked most of the time, but not always.

I decided to meet with superintendents from the three largest school districts in El Paso County, only two out of three met with me. Of the two that I met, one either became pro-Ernesto Cantu or at least not entirely anti-Ernesto Cantu, and the other continued with his anti-charter and anti-Ernesto Cantu sentiments after the meeting. It was one of the most challenging professional conversations I have ever had because try as I might, I could not get through to him.

I met with this superintendent in a board room at their central office building. As he walked in, he quickly dispensed with any pleasantries and jumped right in with, “Ok, let’s get

this over with. Nobody wants you here." I was astounded at his words and struggled to quickly gather my wits and proceed with the conversation I had planned on having.

"Hello Dr. X., my name is Ernesto Cantu. I am the Executive Director of IDEA El Paso. I wanted to take the time to stop by and introduce myself and provide the courtesy of letting you know that we are opening a school in your district. I think we are both here for the same reason-to work for kids."

"Well, nobody wants you here because you work for a for-profit charter school," he responded.

"That's actually not true sir." I continued.

"No, all charter schools are for-profit, and besides, no one asked me about you all coming into the area. I have schools with empty classrooms, and you all are going to take our students."

I realized that the issue was not just his stance on charter schools, but rather a more significant organizational issue he was dealing with that had nothing to do with me; there was no way that I was going to change his mind or his stance on charter schools and possibly me, so I continued cordially and quickly with my talking points and excused myself as soon as I could.

From that encounter, I learned two things. One, sometimes, no matter what I do or say, I won't be able to convince some folks to accept what I am saying, and I must admit that and move on. Secondly, sometimes I must stay the course regardless of what others say or feel if I know that I am approaching my work from a professional and moral place.

This is my daughter

One of my responsibilities as an Executive Director is to make sure that all schools that we operate in the region are fully staffed and fully enrolled. In terms of staffing, El Paso was a gold mine for us with an overabundance of talented candidates. We never struggled to fill positions in our region, and we led the district with the number of candidate applications every year. Student enrollment, however, was much more challenging for many reasons; two major ones, in my opinion, were brand/name recognition and unfamiliarity with charter schools.

Despite these obstacles, we still managed to launch our two sites/four schools in 2018, albeit without being fully enrolled. The ramp-up or year zero leading up to the 2018-2019 school year, we focused almost exclusively on staffing and student recruitment. I titled our approach to student recruitment, "find them, get them, keep them," which meant identify potential students and families, excite them about applying, and ensuring that they stepped foot unto our campuses on day one. Our primary approach was a grassroots campaign that included knocking on doors and holding information sessions where parents were able to learn about IDEA Public Schools, our approach, and about me. While it always felt odd sharing my personal, educational journey to strangers, I wanted potential parents to know that I experienced many of the things they and their children were experiencing, and this was an excellent way to build a personal connection. We always built time into our community information sessions for questions and answers, plus I always walked around interacting with participants in case they had any additional questions. It was at one of these sessions that I met a parent that was to become one of our most prominent advocates- Mrs. Y. Mrs. Y approached me after the information session and said, "Mr. Cantu, this is my daughter Kasey. She is in the 5th grade and receives special education services and can't read. She needs to go to your school."

"Ma'am, I am sorry to hear that. We are open to all children. We have a good approach to helping children receiving special education services. Our goal is to exit them out of the program if we can do so. I need you to fill out an application for our lottery," I explained to her.

Mrs. Y filled out our student application, and we waited for our student lottery. When I first became a principal at IDEA Public Schools, our lotteries consisted of stuffing student applications into a rotating drum and a staff member literally pulling out applications. Now, we use a computerized system that randomly pulls out student names, which is much more efficient but not as fun or enthralling. To add excitement to our events, we still invite potential parents, the general public, and the media and still call out student names, which we then celebrate individually. I still remember our first lottery for IDEA El Paso. I clapped for all students and their families, but I cheered when Kasey's name was announced because I knew that we were building schools in El Paso for students like Kasey and the stories that Mrs. Y shared about her daughter's treatment and lack of attention at previous schools infuriated me. I fundamentally believed then and now that we are here to serve children, and it is our moral obligation and responsibility to do so in a way that provides the best opportunities for all children, especially children like Kasey. Perhaps it reminded me of the disservice I received as a student because I was in English as a Second Language class, and I should have been in regular classes. I met with my guidance counselor and asked to move to a regular English class. I still remember his comment, "What makes you think you can be in regular classes?" I quickly pulled out a copy of the achievement test results I had received from my teacher, which indicated my reading level was a year above grade level. In fact, for two years, my junior and senior year, I maxed out the reading portion with a 12.9-twelfth grade, nine months (Appendix C) .

I am glad that I advocated for myself but know that many students or parents don't advocate for themselves and often unknowingly accept mediocre or subpar service. My personal experience in high school is part of my drive to provide excellent customer service to our students and their families. As a charter school organization, we know that parents have the choice to enroll their children in our schools, just like they have an option to withdraw them if we don't provide an excellent service. For this reason, I value attention to detail, as this is what we will set us apart from other schools and districts.

Conclusion

There is no clear blueprint for writing autoethnography; it can be linear, non-linear, be a written narrative, or a performance (Ellis et al., 2011; Spry, 2001; Humphries, Coupland, & Learmonth, 2016), and it can also be extremely difficult (Berry & Patti, 2015; Wall, 2008). The choice and opportunity are almost infinite, but it does mean, however, that to write an account that other people find interesting, I need to have a broad awareness of the almost infinite variety of ways in which stories are shared (Humphries et. al, 2016). Ultimately as the author and researcher, I chose which life experiences to write about and which ones to reflect on (Medford, 2006). I wrote from a place of joy and pain, pride and humility, and at times sorrow. Vulnerability makes autoethnographic work captivating for both the researcher and the reader (Ngunjiri et al., 2010), and I approached my work in that manner. I chose to use a combination of vignettes, pictures, and letters as artifacts in my data collection, and much like Humphreys (2005), I did so to create a window for the reader to view both my pleasure and pain associated with my professional and personal lives. I included different types of artifacts to resist the temptation of solely relying on memory or personal recall (Freeman, 2018) and much like

Wolcott (2003) in *A Natural Writer*, I was unsure of what to include or exclude so I let the writing take its course but focused on the fact that the heart of ethnography- and even more so for autoethnography, is its singularity and specificity.

Autoethnographic data collection is a challenging undertaking and demands a high level of commitment (Delamont, 2009), much more so than I had anticipated, but one that I have appreciated. Pearce (2010) writes about assumed laziness that is attached to this type of research, particularly in the evocative realm, but there is no apathy in this work- it is grueling. Because of this rigor, it supports a deeper understanding of my life (Richardson, 2000). The data collected here has allowed me to be both reflective and introspective, looking behind, and inward has been arduous yet rewarding.

CHAPTER V

DATA ANALYSIS

We do not write in order to be understood; we write in order to understand.

C. Day Lewis

Storytelling is at the heart of this research, and I cannot have research without analysis (Kidd & Finlayson, 2009). I can analyze the work itself or the process to understand my self-identity or the development of my identity by way of self-interrogation (Gardner, 2014). While the term self-interrogation may sound harsh, it is useful as a way to look at these life memories in a rigorous fashion. To counter the egotistical label that is often attached to autoethnography, there must be some analysis between experiences and the social component (Wall, 2016). Because experience and memories shape how we see the present and the future (Benoit, 2016), I used a thematic analysis approach to identify the most common and salient themes within the data (Braun & Clarke as cited in Maydell, 2010) and connected those themes to my work as an educational leader. As educators, if we want to serve others well, we must improve our craft and approach continuously.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, I categorized my data, life stories, and artifacts into the following groups and have referenced this portion when providing context to the data:

1. Early years- Birth to high school graduation (1970-1988)
2. U.S. Army Years (1988-1991)
3. My Lost Years (1991-1994) Note: I was lost
4. Married and Focused (1994-1997)
5. Life as a Parent and Educator (1997 to Present)

There have been many experiences in my life that have shaped who I am, and it was a challenge choosing a few. For this research, I fixated on epiphanies or events that had a profound effect on me to identify which stories or artifacts to utilize to best address my research questions:

- What are the social, cultural, and political forces that impacted and shaped me as an educator and as a person?
- To what extent does critical self-reflection play a role in the professional development and effectiveness of educational leaders?

I attempted to weave in elements in each of the narratives that addressed and showcased both the forces that shaped me as an educator and as a person, along with emphasizing critical self-reflection and introspection. The use of autoethnography was the best method to answer my research questions because it provided a way for me to not only organize my data but also discover or uncover understanding (Duncan, 2004). The use of this research methodology allowed me to modify the way I saw my former self, enlighten my current representation, and restructure my future self (Custer, 2014). Of the original categories, I identified experiences in four of the five; Married and Focused did not garner its own experience; however, there are elements of this in the Life as a Parent and Educator section. Some categories had multiple narratives. Most of the narratives are written in First-person, except those dealing with the passing of my mother and my early years; those were in the Third person. I alternated between narrator and participant in my stories to detach myself from the emotion and pain that I still feel

from that experience. It was easier for me to narrate the passing of my mother and my early years as if I were talking about a different little boy and not me at the center of the story. During the writing of that portion I recalled the intense pain I felt at my mother's loss and even remembered when as a young boy of maybe six or seven, I saw a lady that resembled my mother in the parking lot of a laundromat, and I yelled out, "*¡Amal!* Mom!" while looking directly at her. To this day, I vividly recall the look on that stranger's face when I called out to her; it was a combination of shock, disbelief, and, most of all, sadness. She felt my pain. I have never shared that story with anyone, and the vulnerability in the writing of these narratives reopened a deep wound that I masked with third-person detachment. Memory and vulnerability begin the healing process for an autoethnographer (Custer, 2014; Poulos, 2012b).

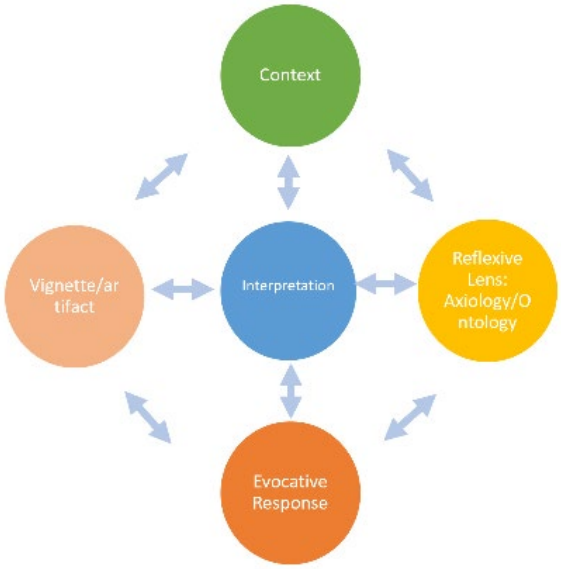
The unique context in which I live (Pizarro, 2005) shaped my identity and work. What I value, or axiology and who I am, my ontology, have been developed over many countless encounters with others in my family, community, and work. I have resisted the stigma of being a low-income *colonia* kid my whole life; this fight has shaped who I am and how I interact with others. Biedenbach and Jacobsson (2016) posit that "axiology addresses questions related to what is valued and considered to be desirable or 'good' for humans and society" (p. 140). For my data collection, I focused on experiences that brought me intrinsic value or value that I place on myself.

Analysis Methods

As mentioned in Chapter Three, my analysis was based on a version of the Structured Vignette Analysis framework offered by Pitard (2016). As I captured my experiences, I strived to provide a context of the situation as I recalled mostly from one view, either *colonia* kid, father,

brother, educator, or leader. For my analysis, I expanded on the context by adding a layered analysis approach predicated on which personality or role grew the most from experience. My framework comprised of the following five components and had different starting points and layered analysis:

- Context
- Vignette/artifact
- Evocative response
- Reflexive lens: Axiology/Ontology
- Interpretation



"Margarita" Analysis

I approach this analysis with a reflexive and introspective lens looking at the writing of this portion from an observer and active participant. The best way to answer my first research question dealing with the social, cultural, and political factors that have shaped my life is by including this period in my life. I wrote Margarita in a place where personal experiences and

circumstances collided to form me. I attempted to create a window for the reader to view both triumphs and pain (Humphries, 2005).

Margarita, my beloved older sister, has played an important role in my life. My sister has proved time and time again what perseverance can do for a person, and that is how she has influenced my life. Our lives are interwoven- She is the oldest of six; I am the youngest. We share the same birthday, fifteen years apart. We were both in the room when my mother passed. To say that we are linked would be an understatement.

I chose to include a short vignette, almost just a conversation I had with my sister over my actions, along with two anecdotes from my time as principal at IDEA Pharr to emphasize her influence on me not just as a person or individual but also as an educator. This focus on the plurality of my existence assists with the layered account of my development. My sister has influenced my work and life. Through this autoethnography, I invite and allow the reader a glimpse into my insider account of how my family and I have weathered unexpected, stressful situations (Adams & Manning, 2015). For all practical purposes, my life should have turned out completely different, yet here I am. I know that having a strong relationship with my sister and family, along with a solid, safe, secure environment mitigated my risk (Ellis et at., 2013). My early years and family experiences set the foundation for what I value and who I am, and this approach to studying my life allows me to make sense of the world I have lived in the past and the world I live in now (Pathak, 2010).

When I view "Margarita" through an axiological and or ontological lens now as an adult, I see that much of what I value and who I am comes from my sister and, to a different extent, my brothers and sister Dora. My sister was good to me while also setting limits and expectations. I

never expected you have to go to college or be successful. It was a basic, "*compórtate bien*. Behave yourself." While I was in junior high and high school, aside from the *compórtate bien*, my sister had two basic rules: finish your homework before you leave the house and be home by 9:00 PM. Nice and simple. While frustrating at times, those simple rules helped form a strong foundation for my later years. As I think about it some more, she did have one more expectation- be on time, or more accurately be early. This value dovetails nicely with my First Sergeant and reinforces my expectation for timeliness to this day. My sister is a wise and strong woman. I often say she is the strongest woman I have ever known in my life. She took on and solved many challenges, and my sister took these challenges on for the right reasons, for her family (Guajardo et al., Spring 2012).

I feel a deep sense of pride for my family. I always strive to be humble and helpful to others. The piece about my sister often brought feelings of joy when I realized just how lucky I have been regardless of what life has thrown at me. I have also felt immense sadness when I coupled my sister's contributions to me with the loss of my parents and the struggles we endured. As I wrote, there were times of such intense pain that forced me to walk away from my work. Matthews (2019) points out that writing about distressing experiences can be agonizing. Still, the actual practice of putting these events on paper can also be a way to cope with the enormity of the situation. I know that nothing will ever take away the pain of losing both my mother and father; however, I have learned to manage with the pain often with a small smile and nod. I do not usually share this experience because the sympathetic looks and sounds make me uncomfortable. I want to be judged on the merit of my work, values, and beliefs, not this event in my life. That is also how I approach my professional work and personal life.

"First-grader with a knife" Analysis

Initially, this vignette's title included my elementary principal's name. I opted to change it to continue with his anonymity, but I did so reluctantly because this gentleman had a profound effect on me. A simple gesture and act of kindness set the groundwork for me as an educator. I doubt he would even remember me now, but possibly he would remember the incident. Without knowing, he had a profound effect on me as a child and now as an adult and educator. I wrote this piece to show that at an early age, I was on track for lower student achievement and a higher probability for criminal behavior tied to the early loss of a parent that Ellis et al. (2013) mention. I was living a self-fulfilling prophecy and did not even know it. Two things resonate with me when I think about those early years, and they have both fostered a sense of service in me. One is my elementary principal and the first-grade teacher looking out for me, and two is my green, furry Smokey the Bear Jacket that I received through some sort of social program.

I was taken to a vast, cavernous warehouse and told to choose clothes. To this day, I am not sure of where I was, but I do know that it happened in first grade, and I received free clothes. I think it was a secondhand store or warehouse because I recall the rows of clothes heaped on tables and rows of clothes on hangers. I bring this in now because these are some of the reasons that I believe in social justice and support programs, especially for low-income kids like me trapped in generational poverty. What I see impacts who I am, what I write, and, most importantly, how the readers react to my message (Jenks in Humphries, 2005). I was lucky that adults near me were strong role models that actively participated in ensuring that I always had what I needed, not necessarily what I wanted. In my mind, this built my character.

Educators play a significant role in the development of children academically and socially. I felt sad when I was writing this section because it reminded me of the many things our students go through. Its writing evoked a memory of me from when I was the Assistant Principal of Operations at IDEA Pharr, and one of our elementary students pulled out a toy gun on the bus on the way to school and yelled, “Everybody down!” When we investigated the incident, the student had a backpack full of toy guns that he was hiding because the local police had raided his house. When the officers stormed his family’s home, they also shouted, “Everybody down!” Our students often experience similar trauma. This *colonia* child was living through trauma and coping in the best way possible. While our stories were different, the similarities were alarming. As an administrator, I advised that we approach the situation from a holistic view rather than merely enforcing a consequence. Most challenging student behavior can be associated with what is not happening in the classroom (Bohanon, 2015) and goes beyond school hallways.

I shared this view of my life as a narrative to serve as a reminder to other educators that we should always approach our work with a sense of grace and to put educators in motion (Holman Jones, 2005) to go beyond classroom walls. This story gives meaning to my existence (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) within the world of education. My principal’s involvement with me went beyond what was happening on school grounds; he looked at the situation from his perspective and acted in what I assume was his conscience, and that is also appropriate for educators to do. We must show children that we care about them, and I hope my narrative pushes other educators to act accordingly. Not every child is growing up the way we did or living the way we live; Educators must take all that into account. It is effortless to move past perceived differences when we have either never been exposed to them or trained to look past them (Boylorn, 2014).

"U.S. Army" Analysis

I am not sure if "U.S. Army" is the appropriate title for this section when most of the text revolves around my first sergeant. He was a scary man for someone of such unique stature. He was not a man to play with only respected and obeyed. In reflecting on my time with him, I reconnected with respect, loyalty, and preparedness. Our unit motto was, "In time of peace prepare for war," and that is what we did. We practiced maneuvers over and over until it became second nature. Over thirty years later and I still remember how to tie a clove hitch and how to splice a torn wire. Those three characteristics that I acquired have served me well in life. They are part of how I still operate and how I expect others to operate, as well. This autoethnography has allowed me to reenter my past so that I can share it with the reader (Custer, 2014) to evoke feelings of solidarity and familiarity. While this story and its telling are of my design, I do so to provide the reader a glimpse into my development.

While I wrote "U.S. Army," I felt my heart racing with excitement as I relived some of the experiences. I used the emotional recall that Ellis (1999) expounds on to remember fine details. The emotions tied to this event allowed me almost to relive it. I have several artifacts and mementos that I could have used, but as I looked over them and tried to choose what held the most significance for me, I knew that writing a vignette about my first real encounter with the First Sergeant would be the most profound. Even now, thirty-plus years later, I still can't bring myself to call him by his given name. During my time with him, I can proudly say that he served as a surrogate father for me; he was tough but fair and never took shortcuts. I know that what I learned and received from him have served me well as an educator. Initially, I believed it would be a challenge to connect my army experience with my research as an educator. Still, I was able to become a border crosser like Burdell and Swadener (1999) going back and forth between

disciplines, and instead of teaching, I was learning and applying. Autoethnography has made it easier for me to find or build bridges between different periods and experiences in my life. Chapman-Clarke (2016) describes the autoethnographer as existing in the edge lands or in-between spaces of rigid research and a method that embodies a more experience-rich approach, and that metaphor fits my life.

The Army exposed me to different cultures, norms, and beliefs, which developed my axiology and ontology. It was a time of many firsts for me. The first time I was away from the Rio Grande Valley. The first time on an airplane. The first time eating a yogurt. The first time interacting with others not from my immediate family, a circle of friends, or community. First time in combat. And, it was the first time I was called a spic. Rather than upset me, it invigorated me. I accepted, owned it, and responded with a few of my own choice words. That soldier never called me anything again and barely spoke to me, which was fine with me. That incident empowered me with the knowledge that I did not have to stay still and put up with nonsense from a racist. I recalled First Sergeant, a Denver, Colorado Chicano telling me in Spanish that I was better because I was Mexican. I became prouder of my Mexican heritage and of who I was. The U.S. Army and First Sergeant gave me the strength to withstand anything else that life put before me. That courage and perseverance are what I plan on passing on to my children and my students.

"He's a Loser from *Las Milpas*" Analysis

When I first began writing, "He's a loser from *Las Milpas*," I intended to make myself the hero of the story. However, when writing about those close to me, I knew that I had to go to great lengths to question my reasons and think about how my work would make them and the

readers feel (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). I hoped to elicit empathy or sympathy from the reader because, after all, in my mind, my father-in-law had wronged me. Through introspection, I realized that I might have been wrong about this perceived slight, and I needed to approach this task delicately because of those involved.

Delamont (2009) states that it is "almost impossible to write autoethnography ethically" (p. 59), but as Bochner and Ellis (2016) point out, any research dealing with human behavior poses ethical predicaments. I agree wholeheartedly that it is almost impossible and that any study can present challenging situations for the researcher and the reader. I struggled to include and even write this narrative as it put me in a precarious position with my father-in-law. I have come to love and respect him immensely, and I refuse to do anything to hurt him or my wife. As I wrote and analyzed, I began to view the incident from an angle that initiated moments of understanding and self-change (Berry & Patti, 2015).

There are many different perspectives that I could have taken to analyze "He's a Loser from the *Las Milpas*" but regardless, I had to place myself at the center of the lived experience to generate both thought and action as an insider (Adams & Manning, 2015) and outsider looking in. My position in this narrative commanded how my story was written, felt, and comprehended (Boylorn, 2014). I could look at it as an educator with students from local *colonias* struggling against that stigma. I could explain it from a wronged hero's point of view or a young man trying to win his future wife's approval and acceptance. Instead, however, I have decided on approaching it from a father's perspective as this aligns with pushing educators to consider parental beliefs or values.

As a father, I know exactly how my father in law felt when he witnessed his distressed daughter. Reflecting on the process that I took to write the vignette and context of the experience initially, I felt anger and frustration at the situation; that anger later shifted inward toward my self-centered approach and self-victimization. Emotion, however, is an expected and welcomed part of autoethnography because, as an autoethnographer, I can analyze my emotions in fine detail to replicate an experience (Buckley, 2015).

This incident pushed me towards a college degree and hardened my resolve to make something of myself. Denzin (2014) states that epiphanies are moments of crisis that leave marks on our lives. They can be either positive or negative. From my perspective, I argue that this incident was both negative and positive; in that order. I perceived it as a negative slight that I turned to a positive. Initially, my drive toward success was me proving my in-laws wrong, that it didn't matter where I was from nor my circumstances. I could become successful. Later in life, I came to realize that this need to prove myself, to have a sense of belonging came from my constant state of otherness. I felt that I was always on the outside looking in, no matter the situation, and this self-victimization forced me into a constant state of proving myself and wanting to fit in. This narrative forced me to think beyond the literal, especially when working with children. We cannot always take everything at face value, but instead, we must look at every angle.

"IDEA Public Schools" Analysis

I shared this short excerpt from my professional life as an example of words having power. What we say and when we say it can move people to action. The simple words, "our Hispanic students need more positive role models in their lives," changed both my professional and personal lives. They enticed me into joining a fledgling organization serving a few hundred

students. It was a bold, risky move on my part because charter schools were new in the Rio Grande Valley in 2003. It took some time and persuasiveness to convince my wife that it was the right move for us.

What enthralled and captivated me was the attention to detail around systems and procedures that permeated the entire campus, along with working side by side with others that enjoyed their work as much as I did. The concept of every child going to a four-year college or university was enticing and mind-boggling at the same time. I drew from my experiences in high school, where no one ever talked to me about attending college or even life beyond high school, and I knew that I did not want that for kids.

I joined the U.S. Army out of necessity; I wanted and needed money for college. The fact that I was a low-income, and for all practical purposes, orphaned minority, should have afforded me some opportunities like grants and scholarships. However, none of the adults in my life at that time pointed me in that direction. I feel that school officials should have at least spoken to me about my plans after I graduated. Perhaps I have some repressed memories, but I cannot recall any counselors, assistant principals, or principals ever broaching the subject. The only teacher that spoke to me about college was my 9th-grade Humanities teacher, and I was already a senior getting ready to graduate by the time we spoke. I officially joined the U.S. Army the summer after my junior year in high school a full year before my graduation, which rendered that conversation pointless.

My analysis is not a tirade against the school officials because of what I perceive as their lack of attention. It is more a call to action so that other students do not have to go through what I did. I know that I needed to advocate for myself and joining the U.S. Army also proved

beneficial to me, so I have no regrets there. What I argue, though, is that we must, at a minimum, provide students the tools and opportunities they need to succeed. If they choose not to take advantage of what we put before them, then that is a choice they must embrace. As an autoethnographic researcher, I know my work is not replicable. It can, however, ensure that what I experienced is not replicated with other students.

The focus on putting children first is what drew me to IDEA Public Schools. The mission of every student matriculating to a four-year college or university keeps me here. I know that when we raise our expectations for students, they will rise to meet them. I have seen it time and time again, especially with my *Las Milpas* students at IDEA Pharr. Students will work hard when we place the opportunities before them, and as the adults in their lives, it is up to us to put them on that path. Guajardo, Guajardo, Salinas, and Cardoza (2019) note that change in social movements is constant, but change can only be sustained by preparing the next generation of leaders, and that is what we must do as educators.

"You're not from *Las Milpas*" Analysis

I did not develop a sense of pride nor appreciation for my *colonia Las Milpas* until after I graduated from the University of Texas-Pan American. All through high junior high and high school, I lived with rather than embraced my neighborhood and community. I was embarrassed about the unpaved roads, utilizing an outhouse, and the perceived poor quality of what I wore to school. In reflecting now, I realize that the angst I felt then is probably what most of our students go through now- not much has changed in the ongoing battles of growing up. I just didn't recognize it back then. I am so thankful now for what I had growing up, and I am ashamed now

that I was ashamed then knowing the sacrifices my family endured. Besides my immaturity, I just did not know any better.

That is why "You're not from *Las Milpas*" is so important to me. By the time I was teaching, my consciousness had grown to include paying attention to what influenced me and what I influenced, especially in the classroom as a teacher or on a school as a leader. I have come to appreciate those serendipitous learning experiences, unanticipated and accidental opportunities to interact and learn from others that go beyond the confines of classroom walls (Krouwel in Asfeldt & Beams, 2017) much more now than I did as a young teacher. When my student did not believe that I was me from *Las Milpas* led to a personal epiphany. Denzin (2014) argues that epiphanies are interactional moments and experiences which leave marks on people's lives." I know that my interaction with my student left a mark on me; however, I am unsure if I left a mark on that student.

In reflecting now, I can see how that moment had a profound impact on my development and quite possibly for students that followed as my approach and rationale changed from that moment forward. That was the last year that I was in a classroom as an assigned teacher, and while I have seen some of my students from that time, I am unaware if I truly made a difference in their lives. I realize that I have ventured into what Ellis et al. (2011) call self-proclaimed phenomena that I perceive had a profound influence on the leader I am. I do speculate on whether this interaction affected my students. Did I help them develop a greater sense of pride in their community and themselves? I have evidence of developing this in my students as a principal, as evidenced by Josie's speech. Still, I can't help but wonder that for every one "Josie" there are countless others that I did not help develop or influenced. Cherng (2017), in quoting Coleman, states that socially disadvantaged individuals rely more on social capital from outside

their immediate families to succeed. Up to that point in my educational career, I do not think I was equipping my students beyond minding their p's and q's. I now know that my upbringing added value to my lessons, but I wish I had been much more strategic at that point. I know that I could have done much more than just share stories with my students to capture their attention.

As educators, we must prepare for those serendipitous learning experiences that are not necessarily part of the lesson plan but convey lifelong learning focused on transformation and not only generating thought but thinkers and doers. This autoethnographic process allowed me to engage with my experiences and memory not only to form my identity but to provide a better understanding of my commonality with my students and others (Benoit, 2016).

"IDEA Frontier" Analysis

I spent the majority of 2005 visiting other charter schools across the United States and writing a school design plan that outlined what IDEA Frontier would look like, sound like, and feel like. I focused on creating a school community dedicated to learning and camaraderie. I chose the school colors, mascot, schedule, and name. I decided on the name IDEA Frontier when I came across a quote by Charles F. Kettering, which read, "Where there is an open mind, there will always be a frontier." I am proud to have founded IDEA Frontier. Frontier seemed like the perfect name for a brand-new school focused on getting students to college. In my mind, education and open mind went hand in hand, and I wanted to provide students and their families those opportunities. I have seen it grow from a few portable buildings serving 500 students to an academic powerhouse in the state of Texas and across the United States (https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/texas/rankings).

I spent most of the summer leading up to our August 2006 launch recruiting students and their families, usually talking to parents in their front yard or at information sessions at local headstarts, libraries, or housing authority meeting rooms. I invested a lot of energy, sweat, and tears, which is what made it so much more challenging for me to step down as principal. It was a challenge to also writing that piece. It brought up harsh memories of failure and ineptitude. However, as Freeman (2018) points out, writing changes both the writer and the reader, and I can say that in compiling "IDEA Frontier," I have moved my consciousness from rebelling and denying to accepting. Things do happen for a reason whether we want to accept them or not. All autoethnographies begin with a story or stories (Wall, 2008), and as authors, we decide how the story is written and conveyed. In this case, I chose to be vulnerable in sharing my lack of instructional skills and knowledge, regardless of how I felt about the situation. My heart was in it, but I lacked the skills that I needed to be successful.

In the many years since Frontier, I have proven, at least in my mind, that I had what it took to be an instructional leader. I needed guidance and management, which is what I am committed to providing people that work with me. My main goal is to see others succeed. My experience at Frontier and in writing this portion for my autoethnography has solidified my stance on that belief. I tell my direct reports that their success is my success, and the reciprocal is also true- their failures are my failures. I know that we have to work for the success of others first, and this will, in turn, impact our success.

Several years after Frontier, a founding IDEA Frontier parent approached me and thanked me. The parent showed me the letter that I had mailed her family, announcing the acceptance of her son to our school (Appendix 3). She had kept it as a memento and expressed

her gratitude not only for her son but also for herself as well. During her son's enrollment at IDEA Frontier, she had begun attending college, which she had completed and was now the college counselor at IDEA Frontier, where she oversees helping more students get to and through a four-year college or university. And that has made all the difference.

Figure 7: JFM IDEA Frontier Senior at College Signing Day

"Twenty years trying to get out" Analysis

I chose to include this snippet of my professional and personal lives to provide some insight into my return to my old neighborhood. The title is accurate. I did feel like I was forced to return to my *colonia*, but my frustration came from my thwarted plans. I was supposed to be joining the founding team at IDEA Alamo, but my manager had different ideas. I know that things have a way of working out, and I realized later that I was placed on that campus to provide some IDEA experience and to capitalize on my knowledge of the area. I

As I wrote "Twenty years," I reflected on my short time as Assistant Principal of Operations and the connections I made with our students and families. I thought about a conversation I had with a teacher friend of mine that worked with the local school district serving children from *Las Milpas* and his excitement for us to open in the area. He mentioned, "I am glad you all are opening in that area. That way, you can take all those *Las Milpas* kids." Almost thirty years after I graduated from high school, my *colonia* kids were still being marginalized and looked down on because of where they lived.

When I think about my story, where I am from, and who my people are (Guajardo et al., Spring 2012), I am always drawn to my *colonia* first. I may have spent the first twenty or so years of my life trying to get out, but I have spent the rest of my life trying to get back because I know how much of a significance my time there has had on me. My experiences prepared me for the challenges of real-life, and my purpose has since transformed into helping and serving children that look and live as I did. I know that many of the families that we served in the *Las Milpas* area and probably in South Texas had minimal knowledge about college attainment, and there was a heavy reliance on school officials to guide them (Cabrera, Lopez, & Saenz, 2012). I am proud to have made it back to my community because it meant that I was part of the team, putting students on the path to college. This study has been transformational for me as I look deeply into some of the more profound experiences that have shaped my life.

"Arriba Las Milpas" Analysis

"*Arriba Las Milpas*" is my defining moment. My most significant point of pride and my greatest success, in my humble opinion, thus far. Chin (2013) argues that our social identities influence our leader identity and behaviors. My experiences, both positive and negative, form who I am as a leader and advocate for my community and students. From the moment I became principal at IDEA College Preparatory Pharr, I set a vision of high expectations for all students and staff members. Cotton (2003) contends that high expectations are guiding factors for high achieving schools.

In 2015, I stood before our staff and stated that IDEA Pharr would be ranked as one of the most challenging high schools in the nation by 2019 and that we would all work toward making that happen. Our focus was on expanding Advanced Placement (AP) opportunities for all

students and on hitting the internal IDEA Public School's goal of thirty percent of seniors designated as AP scholars by the time they graduated. IDEA Pharr College Prep was the first IDEA campus to reach that milestone in 2017. By 2019, IDEA Pharr was ranked the 11th most challenging high school in the nation, and the 10th most challenging in 2020 (*Jay Mathews Challenge Index I High School Ranking System*, n.d). While I was not the principal for the majority of the time at IDEA Pharr, I did spend four years there crafting and guiding our vision and mission.

That is why I have designated "Arriba *Las Milpas*" as my defining moment. Our school made up predominantly of low income, minority kids from *Las Milpas* defied the odds to become a high achieving school.

In writing that narrative, I realized that my axiology and ontology were solidified. I value seeing students and families thrive, and that has become part of who I am, which in turn influences what I do. So, who am I? I am a kid from *Las Milpas*, trying to be the best role model that I can be for kids. Nothing is more important to me than that. From my first stint as principal at IDEA Frontier, I learned that everything rolled up to me. Like most successful administrators, I had to hold myself accountable for the success of the whole campus (Scheurich in Cotton, 2003). This is a story of pride and change. Pride in community and pride in myself led to change not just for me, but for the students I served, and I hope for the reader. I, along with our staff members, proved that we could make a difference in our students and community.

As I mentioned earlier, I did not always feel pride in being from *Las Milpas*. It took a parent yelling out "Arriba *Las Milpas*" to remind me that I had lots to be proud of, and it started with my community. Initially, when IDEA Pharr was set to launch, the name IDEA *Las Milpas*

was proposed. I argued against that name out of concern for the *Las Milpas* stigma. I realize now how foolish I was because it was up to me and others like me to change the narrative and stories that people told about the community and the school. I worked hard to counter the damaging false narrative and to instill pride in our school and, more importantly, our community. I believe that we will make change happen by creating forces of change, starting with our children.

"One in one hundred" Analysis

To this day, I do not know if that data was accurate. I have never attempted to verify it; I have approached my work as if it were true. The fact that one of my students quoted to me at a time when I needed it the most validates its authenticity to me. The important thing was and is that one of my *Las Milpas* students believed it to be accurate, and I need to make it a reality for her and other students like her.

This event occurred during my first year as principal at IDEA Pharr, and it set the tone for my time there. I set out to work hard for my students because not only did I want them to succeed, I also wanted to be a fitting role model for them. I did not begin this process merely to research data; I am in this process in relationship with my students (Trahar, 2009). I am, in fact, a full member of the research group as I study both the impact my community has had on me and the effect I have had on it. I am a complete member researcher engaged in the reflexive analysis (Anderson, 2006a) that will advance the body of knowledge and yet I feel the need to defend my approach to the work and the sharing of my story. Dyson (2007) points out that the use of autoethnography allows me to be both researcher and subject, and this has assisted me in recognizing the relationship between my study and my story. My story is interwoven with the story of my community and of the students I serve. Ngunjiri et al. (2010) argue that all research

is an extension of the researcher's life. My story becomes my students' story, and theirs become mine, which is why "one in one hundred" is an essential component of my development.

"One in one hundred" is my life's work coming to fruition. Aside from my student attending Harvard, she has grown to care for our community as much as I do. Her closing remarks at our New Team and Family Orientation sent the message to our new staff that I was in El Paso for the right reasons: to see communities thrive and to see students succeed. I felt proud of her accomplishments and proud that she saw me as a fitting role model for her and her counterparts. The simple words my student said to me had a profound effect on me. I have used that story several times to illustrate how students can also help transform educators if we just listen to them. I consider it as another facet to serendipitous learning that Asfeldt and Beams (2017) encourage. I must appreciate every opportunity to learn and grow that life provides me.

"Promotion" Analysis

Autoethnography can be both a critical look at the self and a transformative process (Custer, 2014). The word promotion, while exciting for me, also generated thoughts of inadequacy and brought my imposter syndrome to the forefront. I used my connection to my school, IDEA Pharr College Prep and my students, and created a personal barrier to even considering moving up the ranks within my organization. Even today, I seek approval or validation for my actions or results. I have had to force myself to stop asking, "how was that?" or "how did I do?" as a way for personal proof that I am doing a good job or that I know what I am doing. I have this deep-rooted need to belong. I work hard to build my confidence in my abilities and knowledge. Working on this research has pushed that to the forefront for me. Taking a knife to school and "defending" a friend, joining the U.S Army, "He's a loser," "You're not from *Las*

Milpas," are all examples of a desire to be part of something or a desire to prove myself. Rereading "promotion" bared this necessity for me.

I also identified mentorship as another theme in my analysis. Great leaders are also great mentors (Mitchell, 1998) and actively look for and create opportunities for the people they work with and manage. I consider our CEO, my mentor, and I strive to emulate her actions as well. I have mentored, either officially or as de facto, several individuals in our organization. I want to see people succeed and helping them along the way as I have been in my way of fostering success. Mentorship goes beyond formal structures or programs. An influential culture focused on mentoring reinforces bonds in any organization (Zachary, 2020). These bonds lead to more substantial results for our students. Mentoring is also about cultivating talent and placing employees on the path to success by not only opening doors for them but in guiding them through the doorways. "Promotion" highlighted my deep-rooted desires for a strong team focused not only on my development but on the development of all and the importance of having and providing mentorship for others.

"*Viva* El Paso" Analysis

Taking on a new role in any organization can be challenging. For me, taking on a new position in an entirely different part of the state was not only challenging but terrifying. I had to relocate part of my family over 800 miles away from the only home they have ever known, and I did so by leaving my oldest daughter behind. While she was already nineteen at the time, the thought of relocating without her still saddens me. Relationships are crucial to my survival, and along with tight relationships, I need "closeness." Moving without my oldest daughter has been excruciating. I also left behind my sister and brothers. Writing "*Viva*" reminded me of our strong

relationships. I am fond of saying that we may not see each other often, but when we do see each other, we see each other with *ganas* or desire. Ellis et al. (2011) state that autoethnography provides us the opportunities to understand and strengthen our relationships. Chang and Bilgen (2020) go further and argue that autoethnography builds relationships. I agree that I have made new relationships, developed a better understanding, and strengthened my existing ones, and my research journey has helped me recognize this. In writing "*Viva*," I felt the longing to speak and interact with my family members more than I ever have, especially my daughter.

A strong sense of community is important to me, as is evidenced by the emphasis I have placed on both the community I left and the community I joined. In El Paso, I found a new similar community that provided me some of the comforts I was used to in the Rio Grande Valley and some new ones. I have engaged a community of educators, discussed and argued with a community of social justice advocates, interacted with a community of philanthropists and civic leaders, and grown because of it. I had not recognized my new communities before engaging in my research. Autoethnography, as a catalyst for change, can change communities (Chang & Bilgen, 2020), and I am part of that change. Communities are created by engagement and sustained by relationships, not by physical boundaries. However, I still feel an intense, emotional connection to my community in South Texas; I know that those bonds will always be present for me. I have realized that just like I view life through different lenses, I also have different communities surrounding me.

"Meeting local district leaders" Analysis

When I set out to meet and interact with local leaders, I intended to introduce myself and get to know them. After writing "Meeting local district leaders" and rereading and analyzing, I have realized that I wanted to be part of the community, build relationships and, quite frankly,

find some common ground or mentorship. I was new to the region and did not have a social, personal, or professional network. I was the new kid in school that did not have any friends, and I wanted to remedy that not just for me but for my family as well. I figured the educational commonality would be a springboard for any of those three. I wanted to build new relationships to feel more at ease in a new region. My interaction with Dr. X was tense, and as I reflected on my writing, both the act and artifact, I concluded that other, more pressing issues were present. Writing this piece forced me to view not only how my interactions and places I visit or meetings I attend have affected me, but also how I have influenced them (Boylorn, 2014).

When I think of the community context, I now know that perspective matters. What I see and how I approach something will not always necessarily mesh with someone else's views. In my mind, I was trying to establish relationships and become part of the community. To Dr. X, I was an interloper, perhaps even a carpet bagger coming into his community with thoughts of taking advantage of his situation. The fact that he had empty classrooms, and I was launching a campus down the street was probably an outright declaration of war, and I was the outsider in his community and as such was deemed "suspicious and not worthy of trust or consideration" (Boylorn, 2014, p. 314).

Perspective, our own, and others, is of paramount importance to educators, especially when interacting with low-income minority students. If we want to build strong relationships and community with them, we must place ourselves in their unique situations. Students want and need what every adult wants and need: to be cared for, understood, and valued. We can do that by recognizing our own biases, idiosyncrasies, and sometimes egocentric tendencies. Bochner and Ellis (2016) offer some advice when writing autoethnography, which also applies to our actual interactions with others. They ask, "Will you create a world/relationship you later have

trouble living in or act in a way that you wish you had done differently?" (p. 150). We, educators and adults, play a significant role in the development of our children and communities, and we must recognize that students do not have cultural deficiencies but instead bring value to our school communities (Yosso, 2005). The way to begin changing the narrative starts with building authentic relationships predicated on trust and thoughtfulness.

In my interaction with Dr. X, I realize that I was attempting to establish a relationship with him to invite him into my community, and the outcome or optics behind it were the opposite. I was trying to force my way into his. I draw a parallel to my interactions with students when they have joined our school communities. Did we invite them, force them, or build with them? Again, perspective matters.

"This is my daughter" Analysis

I have had several interactions with parents in the twenty-plus years in education, and while I do not recall every single one, I do archive the ones that have had a particular effect on me. My founding IDEA Frontier mother, for example, that shared her son's acceptance letter. She was the first IDEA Frontier parent to not only apply for her son but also to help me spread the word about IDEA Public Schools by distributing student applications. She modeled a firm conviction in not only believing in something but also moving to action. The "*¡Arriba Las Milpas*!" parent also comes to mind. I cannot just focus on perceived deficiencies as a means for change. Whether in South or West Texas, I cannot separate joy and pride in the community from the work I do, if I want to make a difference. I work toward a better day for children because of my social and political conditioning and a keen sense of purpose that originates from growing up in my community of *Las Milpas* (Guajardo et al., 2019). That is a potent catalyst. I am moved to

action because I care, not because it is mandated. My research has allowed me to reengage with my personal and professional experiences and reconcile them to a new community where I live, work, and engage others and myself.

My interactions with Kasey's mother and father and my new community have become part of that treasure trove of memories, not just because these memories are pleasant, but because they have galvanized me to action. My connections with them have been calls to action. I have witnessed their daughter grow both academically, personally, and socially and I know that we are making a difference.

Writing "This is my daughter," angered and excited me. I was angry because of the injustices and inattention that that family suffered. Her mother recalling previous teachers telling her, "Ma'am, they just don't want to help you daughter," about previous school administrators incited me to the point of wanting to pick up a phone and call someone, anyone.

Kasey's experience reminded me of my own when I was enrolled in English as Second Language classes as a 10^{th} and 11^{th} grader when I knew I did not belong there (Appendix B). Note: I think my high school transcript does not reflect my enrollment in Corr lang (Corrective Language) in the 11^{th} grade. My guess is that because I moved during the fall semester into an English three class, and I finished out the year in that class, it may not have been recorded in my final transcript. When I reviewed my school academic record, I came across something that upset me even more. As a ninth-grader in high school, I failed Pre-Algebra, but I attended summer school to retake the course and earn the points I needed to pass. I saw evidence of that corroborating my memory; however, I realized I was re-enrolled in Pre-Algebra again the following year. I do not know why, but I can only surmise it was either an oversight, deliberate

action or outright inaction. Regardless, I took that course twice and was enrolled in corrective classes unnecessarily, and no one paid attention to the little details. I realize that I lived the nightmare Valenzuela (1999) wrote about, and I cannot help but wonder how many children go overlooked, unchallenged, or underserved. My memories help me write my own story, and my memories reinforce those stories as I search for evidence to support my research (Trostin, 2013). I am glad that my personal experience has spurred me into action. Students should get the attention and support that they deserve, and it is up to everyone to make sure that happens.

Findings

My research has put me at the center of my story. As the owner, I relay it from my perspective but provide an opportunity for the reader to interpret from his or her vantage point as well. I have captured personal experiences and shared them as narratives to not just inform the reader but also to construct meaning for myself. I have gone from merely describing or relaying essential life events to embedding myself, my development, and my values into my research to create a more profound sense of understanding. I did so to do more than just depict what and how I lived. I wrote to obtain meaning (Bochner, 2000; Deitering, 2011). I intended to place myself at the center of the research, invite the reader in and create a space to connect my story to not only elicit an evocative response but also to share in my analysis (Malthouse, 2011).

The more I wrote, the more excited I became as new ideas and direction opened before me. I wanted to explore every avenue, every inch, and every corner of my life and my development as a way of understanding my axiology and ontology. I realized that who I was is as important as who I am. One will always inform the other, and I shared this relationship using autoethnography as my framework and self-narratives as my method. Bochner (2000) explains

that through self-narratives, we look at the past through the lens of the present. I went beyond looking at the past; I also chose to relive my experiences, as painful as they were, to gain a better understanding of my development and how my experiences can be of benefit for educators. I used vulnerability and transparency intentionally to enthrall not just the reader, but myself as well (Ngunjiri et al., 2010) as I dove into my past from my present. It was a challenge deciding what direction to explore, which proverbial rabbit hole to avoid and which experience, epiphany, or era to prioritize.

As I examined pieces of my life for this study, I focused on two aspects. First, I reviewed my life as objectively as possible within the first proposed categories to determine which events had a more profound effect on my development and would guide educators.

1. Early years- Birth to high school graduation (1970-1988)

   Margarita, First grader with a Knife
2. U.S. Army Years (1988-1991)

   U.S. Army
3. My Lost Years (1991-1994) Note: I was lost

   He's a Loser
4. Married, Focused, Parent, Educator (1994-present)

   You're not from Las Milpas, IDEA Frontier, Twenty Years Trying to Get Out, ¡Arriba Las Milpas!, One in One Hundred, Promotion, Viva El Paso, Meeting Local District Leaders, This is my daughter

Second, I identified which events would help me get to the "why" not just "what" (Nash & Viray, 2013) as a means to address my two research questions:

- What are the social, cultural, and political forces that impacted and shaped me as an educator and as a person?
- To what extent does critical self-reflection play a role in the professional development and effectiveness of educational leaders?

I looked at several different events in my life through both my professional and personal lenses to determine which epiphanies had a more lasting effect on me. I did this to ensure that my critical self-reflection would be beneficial for both my professional and personal selves as I have come to realize that I cannot separate the two. I am sure that after seventeen years in an organization, many of the core operating mechanisms have seeped into my ontology as well.

I wrote. I read. I rewrote, and finally, I analyzed and interpreted. During my data collection, I felt compelled to not only weave a narrative but also to lay the foundation for the reader by providing context and insight into my axiology and ontology, before, during and after the event. I did so also to guide (Wall, 2016) and invest the reader as a witness (Ellis et al., 2011), associate, and colleague. As I analyzed, I looked for themes or contributing factors through many different lenses. I developed a sense of what was important to me and my development.

I combed through each story and section and began coding by values as a means to identify factors or themes (Appendix D). The three most important factors or forces that shaped, guided, and in some cases, protected my development were: relationships, sense of community, and mentorship. Those three factors were most relevant to my development, perseverance, and success. I also did a reverse analysis to determine which narratives I could categorize into each factor to determine which was the most important to me (Table 1).

Relationships were most prevalent, followed closely by community then mentorship. I have identified those three factors as being the most important not only to my development and my ontology but, more importantly, my axiology. I value those over any. If, as educators, we focus on those three, I am positive that we can foster not only successful students but also successful schools. My data collection and data analysis have assisted me in not only exposing myself but, more importantly, finding my voice (Forber-Pratt, 2015). Engaging in this autoethnographic work has enabled me to explore the depths of life events that have been turning points in my life (Trostin, 2013).

Table 1

Analysis Table

Themes	**Narratives**
Relationships	Margarita First grader with a knife U. S. Army He's a loser IDEA Public Schools You're not from *Las Milpas* IDEA Frontier ¡*Arriba Las Milpas*! One in a one hundred Promotion *Viva* El Paso Meeting local district leaders This is my daughter
Community	Margarita U. S. Army IDEA Public Schools You're not from *Las Milpas* IDEA Frontier Twenty years trying to get out ¡*Arriba Las Milpas*! Promotion *Viva* El Paso Meeting local district leaders This is my daughter
Mentorship	Margarita U. S. Army He's a loser IDEA Public Schools IDEA Frontier One in a one hundred Promotion Meeting local district leaders

Relationships

Relationships and the building of relationships is an essential component of my ontology. I strive for human and social connection, and while I often say that I am an extroverted introvert,

I know that is untrue. For school children and school staff, relationships are crucial for the success of any campus. Some students that step unto our campuses labeled at-risk due to circumstances out of their control. Strong relationships between educators and students can mitigate the risk of failure (Pianta, 1999). I was not surprised that relationships were a determining factor for my success and development. I am at heart a social person and struggle in solitude. I make friends and social connections quickly, but this is not the case for everyone. That is why building, keeping, and cultivating relationships is vital for educators.

The majority of my data pieces generated a relationship theme or exhibited relationships as a factor in my development. Quite honestly, it would seem that relationships have often pulled me out of harm's way or set me on the right path. In *First-grader with a knife,* the relationship I had with my teacher compelled her to intercede on my behalf. How many times have educators gone out of their way to help a child they have a connection with or want to see them succeed? How many times have teachers or administrators not worked hard for students?

In reflecting on my own experience in high school, I felt that I had to advocate for myself. However, I realize that I had not developed a strong relationship with any of my teachers or administrators. The process of building relationships is based on power and negotiation; It is constant and active (Guajardo et al., 2103). I had not engaged in that process with any of my teachers, nor had they with me. I had the will and fortitude to act on my behalf; however, many of our students may not. It is up to us, the adults in the system, to create opportunities for students. As educational leaders, we must remember that teachers will be motivated to work harder for student's success when they have a positive relationship with students (Hamre & Pianta, 2001), and we have to create the space and opportunity for that to happen. I know I have worked harder for students on many occasions, and I have seen teachers I work with do so also.

Relationships they have with their peers, and their teachers fortify our students' ability to thrive in a classroom setting (Birch & Ladd, 1997). Relationships play a vital role in the success of our students, and it is up to us to generate opportunities for children. The opposite may also be true. Research indicates that supportive and genuine relationships are essential in creating a positive school environment (Gregory, Bell, & Pollock in Anyon et al., 2018). Strong relationships with teachers might mitigate home life factors linked to a disruptive home environment (Cicchetti & Lynch in Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Pianta (1999) explains that teacher interactions are often intersections on students' pathways that can change the trajectory of a student. While it is challenging for me to recall many of my teachers, outside of my first-grade teacher that have played an intersecting role in my life, I am proud knowing that I have placed myself as an intersection for many children and peers.

Relationships have been integral in my development, my successes, and my challenges. It is evident that where strong relationships existed, *Margarita, U.S. Army, First-Grader*, etc. I had the ability to bounce back much easier and quicker from difficult situations. Where a strong connection, *He's a loser,* for example, did not exist my first reaction was fury and shifting blame at what I deemed a wrong. What was missing was a clear path toward reconciliation because of this missed opportunity on my part. This study has aided me in reflecting and introspectively looking at my life and my development as a way to understand who I am and how I came to be who I am. Autoethnography calls to me because it allows me to make sense of the world I have lived in (Pathak, 2010).

Community

Community flows beyond boundaries; it is also a state of being. A person can live in a place and not be part of a community or not live in a place and continue as a member. I am

lucky to have experienced both in my development. My family served as my first community. My brothers, sisters, and I all shared a commonality that went outside familial relationships. *Las Milpas* offered me a haven to reside in with people that looked like me, lived like me, and cared about me, and because of this, I was able to be me (Mcmillan, 1996) safely. My data indicates that community has been vital not only to shaping my axiology and ontology but also to my growth.

In the U.S. Army, I integrated into a different community from which I had been used to growing up. Joining the armed services filled my need to belong to a community and be part of something bigger. I trusted my fellow soldiers, and they trusted me as family members do. It was this trust in each other that allowed us to perform well during Operation Desert Storm. I did not have to look over my shoulder or second guess my brother's abilities, fortitude, or expertise in getting the job done or in keeping each other safe. My acceptance and the trust others had in me fostered my sense of belonging (Mcmillan, 1996). We had our way of engaging and interacting with each other that went beyond wearing the same uniform.

I have been a part of the education community for over twenty years and know that students need the same type of community that creates a sense of belonging. It must be inviting and tolerant of differences. Our role is not to strip students of their identity, language, or culture (Valenzuela, 1999). Instead, we should celebrate what they add to the community. Students will learn best when educators address differences by accepting differences (Flores, 2013). Students must feel safe, welcomed, and accepted regardless of their background. Shields (2000) argues that given the many diverse backgrounds of our students, the concept of schools as homogenous spaces is inadequate in our current times. I think about my work as an educator and what we call culture in our schools and wonder if our attempts at uniformity, straight lines, and instructional

practices honor our students' identities or whether I have been subtracting by adding. As educators, if we ignore diversity in attempts to adhere to rules and customs in our schools, we run the risk of further alienating marginalized students (Shields, 2000).

When I moved my family to El Paso, we chose to join a new community that was similar to what we were used to, but still unique. *Meeting Local leaders* exposed my desire to belong once again not only to the physical community but to the El Paso educational community as well. Community begins with trust (Khalifa, 2012), and I attempted to build trust with personal interactions. My personal experience with Dr. X equates to newly promoted leaders encountering the same type of resistance. New team dynamics, a new language, and customs are but a few of the pieces that they must contend with as they learn to navigate new surroundings. As leaders, we create the environment in our schools and workplace (Flores, 2013), and it is up to us to not only accept differences but to encourage them. While it was clear that Dr. X did not want to receive me into his community because I worked for a charter school organization, I nonetheless continued to engage with him respectfully. I have also encouraged our staff to be more appreciative of the differences that their counterparts bring to the field. I ensure that we do not use disparaging commentary when referring to local traditional school districts. I strive to create a welcoming community and share what I can with other educators. At the beginning of every school year, I call a local superintendent with the offer to collaborate on something, anything. I know it is up to me first and foremost to foster good relationships and continue to attempt to either join his community or have him join mine. I know that if we are going to deliver on our promise to parents, we need strong community partnerships that go beyond the confines of our schools, and we need a deep understanding of our neighborhoods (Khalifa, 2012). Understanding is true for all facets of education and leadership.

My research has given voice to my life (Pathak 2010) in ways that I had never considered, nor experienced. I have used my personal events to reflect and think introspectively about my interactions with students, parents, educators, and community leaders. I know that my values and beliefs have influenced the research process and possibly the outcomes (Etherington, 2007), and I am at peace with that because it has allowed me to question my master narrative in my quest to discover who I am.

Mentorship

In my life, I have benefited from strong relationships, a sense of community, and mentorship. I encountered both traditional and non-traditional mentors. In my mind, traditional mentors are duly appointed or assigned, and they range from mentor teachers to army sergeants that have either an ascribed role or responsibility to develop or influence new members. Often, mentors are older, wiser members that influence the development of younger members (Torey & Blamires in Preston et al., 2014). Non-traditional mentors are the ones we find in *la Universidad de la Vida*, the university of life (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2007). These are mentors that fall into the role either knowingly or unknowingly and guide us through challenging times by imparting wisdom or sometimes strong words or direction. My first sergeant in the U.S. Army was a non-traditional mentor, so was my sister and the IDEA Public Schools CEO. The roles weren't assigned, yet they had profound effects on my development.

As educational leaders, we shape younger generations of students, teachers, and leaders, and as such, our knowledge is developed by and in our lived experiences (Preston et al., 2014). I have been fortunate to have had strong role models in my professional and personal lives. In *Las Milpas*, I feel that many of the older folks that knew my parents, or my situation took it upon themselves to offer words of encouragement or rebuking sentiments when I strayed from the

correct path. I have learned and grown from engaging with many different people in my lifetime. Preston et al. (2014) explain that transformational learning is influenced by personal experiences that manifest themselves through frequent interaction, communication, and reflexivity. Mentorship involves more than teaching skills; it is about imparting knowledge from which others can gain the confidence to make decisions for the right reasons. The closer I worked with both official and unofficial mentors, the more success I enjoyed both personally and professionally.

Mentorship has played a crucial role in my development and success, and I attempt to provide my mentorship when situations present themselves. I know that advice and mentorship, while not always solicited nor appreciated, have played a significant role in my life. My sister, Margie, and her husband, Beto, come to mind. While they cared for me as a brother and possibly son, their tutelage went beyond family matters. They helped set me on the right path even when I didn't believe in myself. They modeled for me what it means to care for someone to the point where it hurts, and because of this, I attempt to do the same for others, regardless if they are related to me or not. The basis for any mentoring relationship is tied to a sincere desire to develop someone, professionally or personally (Daresh, 2004). Having someone as a resource has been beneficial to my development, and I endeavor to do the same for others.

Throughout my professional life, I have had strong role models and mentors. Our CEO placed opportunities in front of me on many occasions. Joining IDEA Public Schools as a tutor, then becoming a teacher and leader was not by accident. I know that I had the merit and skills that I needed but still required an opportunity. The relationship between a mentee and mentor can be beneficial to both (Daresh, 2004). If, in an official capacity, cooperation between an experienced leader and an ambitious, less experienced leaders can lead to high levels of student

achievement (Daresh in Clayton et al., 2013). During my first year as a teacher at IDEA Public Schools, my students did reasonably well in the state accountability assessment. These results helped propel me to a principal position. I benefited from our CEO's mentorship, and so did our students as well as our organization.

I worked hard for my students and my manager. I tell young leaders that people will follow them for one of two reasons. The title they hold or the person they are. People will always work harder for a person than for a title. This is especially true when there is a strong mentoring relationship. I have also benefited from being a mentor to others. Some scholars (Clayton et al., 2013) point out that mentors often become more effective when mentees challenge their beliefs and philosophies. As a mentor, it is important to honor the values and beliefs of others by modeling proper behavior because mentors help indoctrinate younger members. Mentors play a role in socializing mentees to the vital operating mechanisms or customs of an organization (Clayton et al., 2013; Daresh, 2004; Duncan & Stock, 2010) or community, and my research shows that I have gained much from influential mentors. As a leader, it is up to me to ensure that the next generation is ready to lead, prosper, and live in my community. Guajardo et al., (2019) argue that community, family, and relationships are the foundation for their success, and they are also at the root of mine.

Educators play a crucial role in preparing students for the classroom and beyond. Biesta (2015) argues that education has three distinct components: the transfer of information, the socialization or transfer of cultural, political, and traditional practices, and finally, the transfer of normative behavior or interaction with one another. We do so much more than teach arithmetic and writing. We shape the lives of our students.

Recommendations

I want to offer some advice to educators and leaders. First and foremost, honor personal stories to construct meaning. It is perfectly acceptable for us to share parts of our lives with students openly and to invite them to share with us as well. The mutual sharing of experiences can help create bonds and stronger relationships between teachers and students. Stories are unique, yet tried and true way to teach, and opportunities often present themselves in our classrooms serendipitously. Poulos (2014) states that the community is constructed through the use of stories. When we take the time to listen to our students, we honor their contributions to the body of knowledge as well.

Relationships are a crucial factor to success in any classroom and school. Focus on fostering relationships between teachers and students, leaders and teachers, and school personnel and families. We are only as strong as our relationships. People will work harder when they know that someone genuinely cares for them. Autoethnography has shown me that it is vital to not only have strong relationships but also to understand them (Ellis et al., 2011), and as educators, building this understanding begins with us. Students set foot onto our campuses for a reason, and that is to learn. We must model for them the behaviors we expect, and strong relationships are a necessity. Froiland and Davison (2014) point out that parent-school relationships also impact school results, so it is imperative that educators build, healthy, long-lasting relationships

Educators and leaders must make students and families feel welcomed into their campus communities. Without a sense of community, schools, and teachers often work in silos. Families often rely on educators for more than classroom lessons. They usually require guidance and direction beyond classroom walls, and as educators, it is our professional obligation to provide as

much guidance as possible. Everyone wants to belong to something, whether they are willing to admit it or not, and educators should foster an environment that is welcoming and instructive. Students and teachers need influential mentors in their lives. Educators and leaders must be strong role models for children and adults. Whether this is in an official capacity or not, we must strive to guide those we interact with continuously. Mentoring goes beyond helping someone follow the rules. It is about ensuring that learning happens along with clear guidance on how to be a better student, leader, and a better person. We have a moral obligation to put others on track for success. Educators must not only be academic and professional mentors; we must also be life mentors.

Conclusions and Critical Self-Reflection

Life as a *Milpero* was challenging yet rewarding. I am proud to be from the "bad" side of town because I, along with many like me, have proven that it doesn't matter where you were born, come from or live to make a difference in today's world. Hard work and dedication do pay off. When I began this journey of self-discovery, I did so to complete the requirements for an advanced degree, but I know that I have gained so much more. At this point, I am not sure if I chose autoethnography, or if autoethnography chose me. However, I know that I was able to shape the research topic I chose (Shashidhar et al., 2013) and head in a direction that felt correct. I identified contributing factors that assisted me through my professional career and identified critical self-reflection as essential not just for educators but for everyone. The qualitative approach and autoethnographic method allowed me to explore not only myself but also my development and being. My research has shown that what I value (axiology), most are strong relationships and community, and through my journey who I am (ontology) has been shaped and developed by mentorships. My Autoethnographic journey went beyond merely analyzing and

organizing evidence; it fostered discovery (Duncan, 2004). Reflection and introspection are at the root of transformation. I knew that a quantitative method would not provide access to my inner thoughts and actions to analyze my experiences as a way to contribute to the understanding of the social world (Wall, 2006).

In my research, I zoomed in introspectively at individual events and experiences and zoomed out reflectively searching for events, persons, or experiences that have shaped my axiology and ontology as a way of understanding a broader cultural, and social framework (Hokkanen, 2017). I have read, explored, and written about autoethnography to make sense of my world and development. Initially, I utilized autoethnography as a bridge between who I was and who I am, but I realized that who I am is who I am, and I do not require a bridge to connect me to my past or future. I did not have to construct a bridge to remain connected to my family and community. I realize now that I never lost that connection. Duncan (2014) posits that reality is not fixed, but instead changes with the observations and principles of the spectator. Autoethnography provided me the opportunity to view my life from a different vantage point. I used to think that I operated with a sense of guilt because experience has afforded me various opportunities. Still, I have come to realize that I had to make my opportunities and function under my merit and fortitude. I have been lucky that strong relationships, a strong sense of community, and mentors have bolstered my survival, advancement, and transformation.

Campbell's Chicken Noodle Soup™ and Saltine Crackers signify a difficult time in my life because I vividly remember eating that when my mother passed away. I relive the trauma not only of that day but also the following weeks and possibly years. As I reflected on this experience, a strong emotional reaction often moved me to sorrow. So much so that I would forgo writing for periods at a time. Ellis (1999) asserts that we remember minute details for

events that have had a profound, evocative effect on us, and I was amazed and saddened at the amount of detail I recalled.

I did not attend my mother's funeral, but I did see the funeral procession pass south on U.S. Highway 281 on its way to the small, out of the way cemetery in *El Capote.* The cemetery, located in the middle of several agricultural fields and irrigation canals, is about a mile from the Mexican border. A year later, my father was buried next to my mother. Through my research, I discovered that while those events were life-changing for me, my sister Margie becoming the head of the family, had a much more transformational effect on me because she set my life on the right path.

The use of autoethnography and personal narratives allowed me to explore my life experiences and invite the reader to join me for the journey. I approached my study by choosing to look at it through different lenses because my identity is comprised of many different personas. (Lundquist, 2003). I viewed it as a father, husband, son, brother, educator, and leader as a means to construct an understanding of how different factors have impacted and shaped my life. In many instances, I relived past experiences to uncover that understanding and to share my triumphs, failures, and challenges with the reader. Autoethnography permitted me the use of my biography as a process and product (Chapman-Clarke, 2016) to be able to delve deeper into understanding my axiology and ontology.

As an educator, I experienced many life-altering experiences, both in and out of the classroom, and my students often presented countless serendipitous learning opportunities (Krouwel in Asfeldt & Beams, 2017) led to stronger bonds with my students and a greater understanding of their own lives. I appreciate that my research has brought that to the forefront. While I feel I have made a difference in many children and adult lives, I know that many have

made a difference in mine. I have learned as well as taught. I value seeing children and adults thriving and succeeding. I am particularly further moved when I see former students making a difference in their lives and communities. I have endeavored to be a good role model and advocate for others. I see evidence of this in the many different communities that I have worked in the great state of Texas. From Alamo, Edinburg, Donna, Brownsville, San Benito, and Pharr, I have focused on serving children and, in the case of Windham ISD adults.

I am particularly proud of my children, as well. They have shown me what it means to be part of something grander by pursuing their dreams. My oldest daughter earned her college degree from my alma mater, the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. My two youngest are hard at work at the University of Texas-El Paso. Through them and the many other children that have touched my life, I know that I have broken the cycle of not attending college, and we are modeling that for families everywhere. All it takes is one to change the trajectory. I was the first in my family, and I know that I will not be the last.

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2012 campus AEIS+Report. (n.d.) Retrieved April 21, 2020 from https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/cgi/sas/broker?_service=marykay&_program=perfrept.perfmast.sas&prgopt=2012%2Faeis%2Falltypec.sas&year4=2012&year2=12&topic=aeis&gifname=%26GIFNAME&title=AEIS%2BReport&level=campus&search=campback&third=0&sublevel=camp&ptype=HTML&campback=108807008+

2013 TAPR. Retrieved April 24, 2020 from https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov.perfreport/tapr.2013/static/campus/c108807008.pdf

APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A

Dear Ernie Cantu,

As a teacher you inspired me to never give up on math. I remember when I would stay after school to get extra help on my failed assignments, such was getting corrections or tutoring. I liked the old war stories that you would tell and that "get your work done or I'll make you do push-ups attitude". I always thought of you as a drill sergeant teaching math, but with a "Smile" everyday.

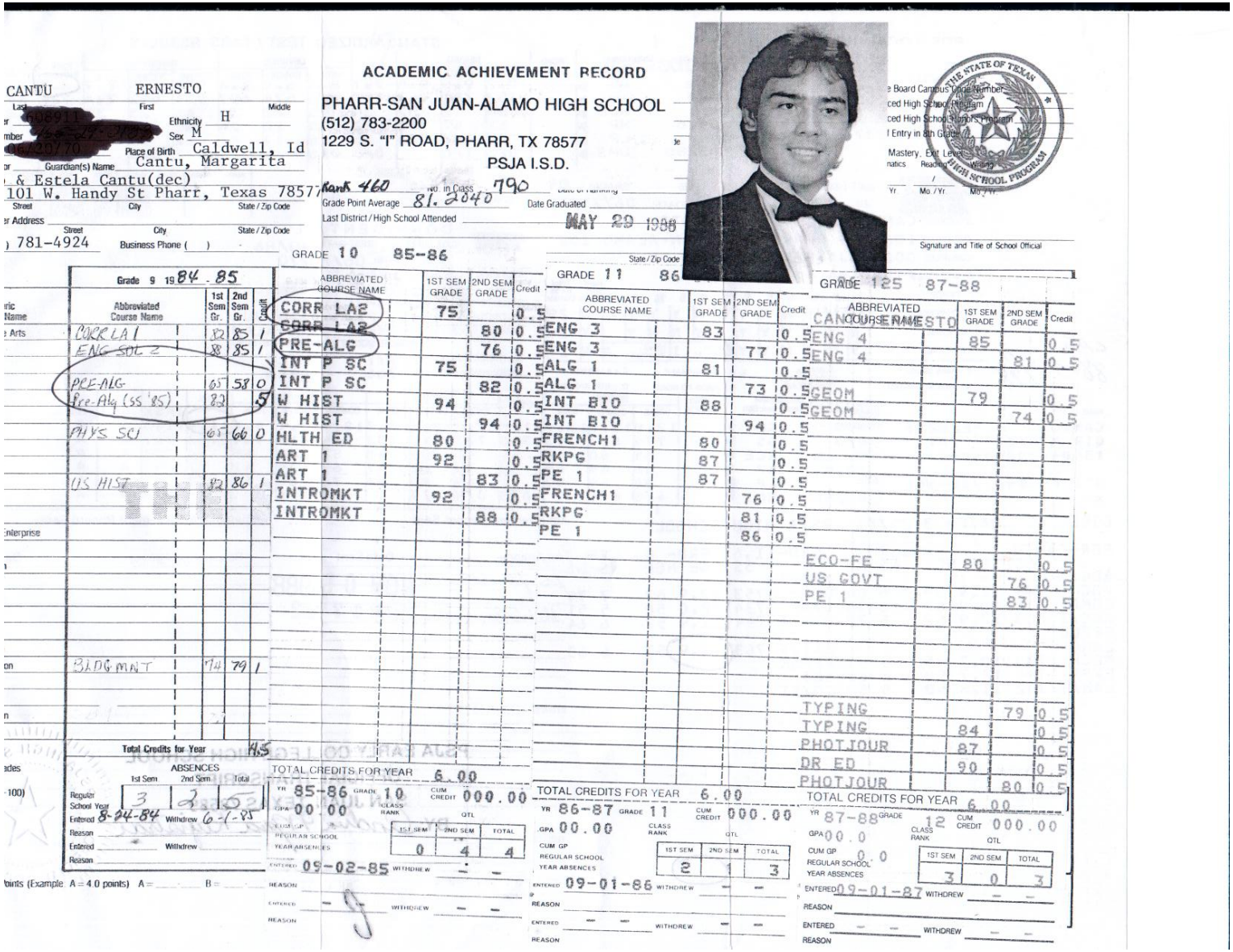
My life was different after I left sixth grade, I felt like I had to walk harder and work on achieving my goals in life. You pushing me was the best thing that ever happened to me, I never actually had anyone to push me in my first years of Idea. As I finished sixth grade, I knew I would have to carry on what I learned in your class .

Overall, your math was quite challenging for me. I needed little pushes here and there to get me going in the right direction. I was faced with little obstacles, but eventually I got over them, which seemed easier since you helped me. Even as a father, you were still able to put the time and effort to help me.

Now that you are a principal, I feel even better since I was once helped by a principal and a veteran from the military. I always felt alone, but after I passed a your class , I felt more determined.

Sincerely,
Eleazar Mejia

APPENDIX B



ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT RECORD

PHARR-SAN JUAN-ALAMO HIGH SCHOOL
(512) 783-2200
1229 S. "I" ROAD, PHARR, TX 78577
PSJA I.S.D.

CANTU ERNESTO
Last First Middle
[redacted] Ethnicity H
Sex M
[redacted] Place of Birth Caldwell, Id
Guardian(s) Name Cantu, Margarita
& Estela Cantu(dec)
101 W. Handy St Pharr, Texas 7857[illegible]
Street City State / Zip Code
Address
Street City State / Zip Code
) 781-4924 Business Phone ( )

Rank 460 No. in Class 790
Grade Point Average 81.2040 Date Graduated
Last District / High School Attended MAY 29 1988

THE STATE OF TEXAS HIGH SCHOOL PROGRAM
Board Campus Code Number
ced High School Program
ced High School Honors Program
Entry in 8th Grade
Mastery Exit Level
natics Reading Writing
Yr. Mo. / Yr. Mo. / Yr.
Signature and Title of School Official

GRADE 10 85-86

Grade 9 19 84 - 85				
ric Name	Abbreviated Course Name	1st Sem Gr.	2nd Sem Gr.	Credit
e Arts	CORR LA I	82	85	1
	ENG SOC 2	88	85	1
	PRE-ALG	65	58	0
	Pre-Alg (SS '85)	82		.5
	PHYS SCI	65	66	0
	US HIST	82	86	1
nterprise				
on	BLDG MNT	74	79	1
n				
ades				
-100)				

Total Credits for Year 4.5

ABSENCES

	1st Sem	2nd Sem	Total
Regular School Year	3	2	5

Entered 8-24-84 Withdrew 6-1-85
Reason
Entered Withdrew
Reason

points (Example: A = 4.0 points) A = B =

ABBREVIATED COURSE NAME	1ST SEM GRADE	2ND SEM GRADE	Credit
CORR LA2	75		0.5
CORR LA2		80	0.5
PRE-ALG		76	0.5
INT P SC	75		0.5
INT P SC		82	0.5
W HIST	94		0.5
W HIST		94	0.5
HLTH ED	80		0.5
ART 1	92		0.5
ART 1		83	0.5
INTROMKT	92		0.5
INTROMKT		88	0.5

TOTAL CREDITS FOR YEAR 6.00

YR 85-86 GRADE 10 CUM CREDIT 000.00
GPA 00.00 CLASS RANK
CUM GP QTL
REGULAR SCHOOL
YEAR ABSENCES

	1ST SEM	2ND SEM	TOTAL
	0	4	4

ENTERED 09-02-85 WITHDREW — —
REASON
ENTERED — WITHDREW — —
REASON

GRADE 11 86

ABBREVIATED COURSE NAME	1ST SEM GRADE	2ND SEM GRADE	Credit
ENG 3	83		0.5
ENG 3		77	0.5
ALG 1	81		0.5
ALG 1		73	0.5
INT BIO	88		0.5
INT BIO		94	0.5
FRENCH1	80		0.5
RKPG	87		0.5
PE 1	87		0.5
FRENCH1		76	0.5
RKPG		81	0.5
PE 1		86	0.5

TOTAL CREDITS FOR YEAR 6.00

YR 86-87 GRADE 11 CUM CREDIT 000.00
GPA 00.00 CLASS RANK
CUM GP QTL
REGULAR SCHOOL
YEAR ABSENCES

	1ST SEM	2ND SEM	TOTAL
	2	1	3

ENTERED 09-01-86 WITHDREW — —
REASON
ENTERED — WITHDREW — —
REASON

GRADE 12 87-88

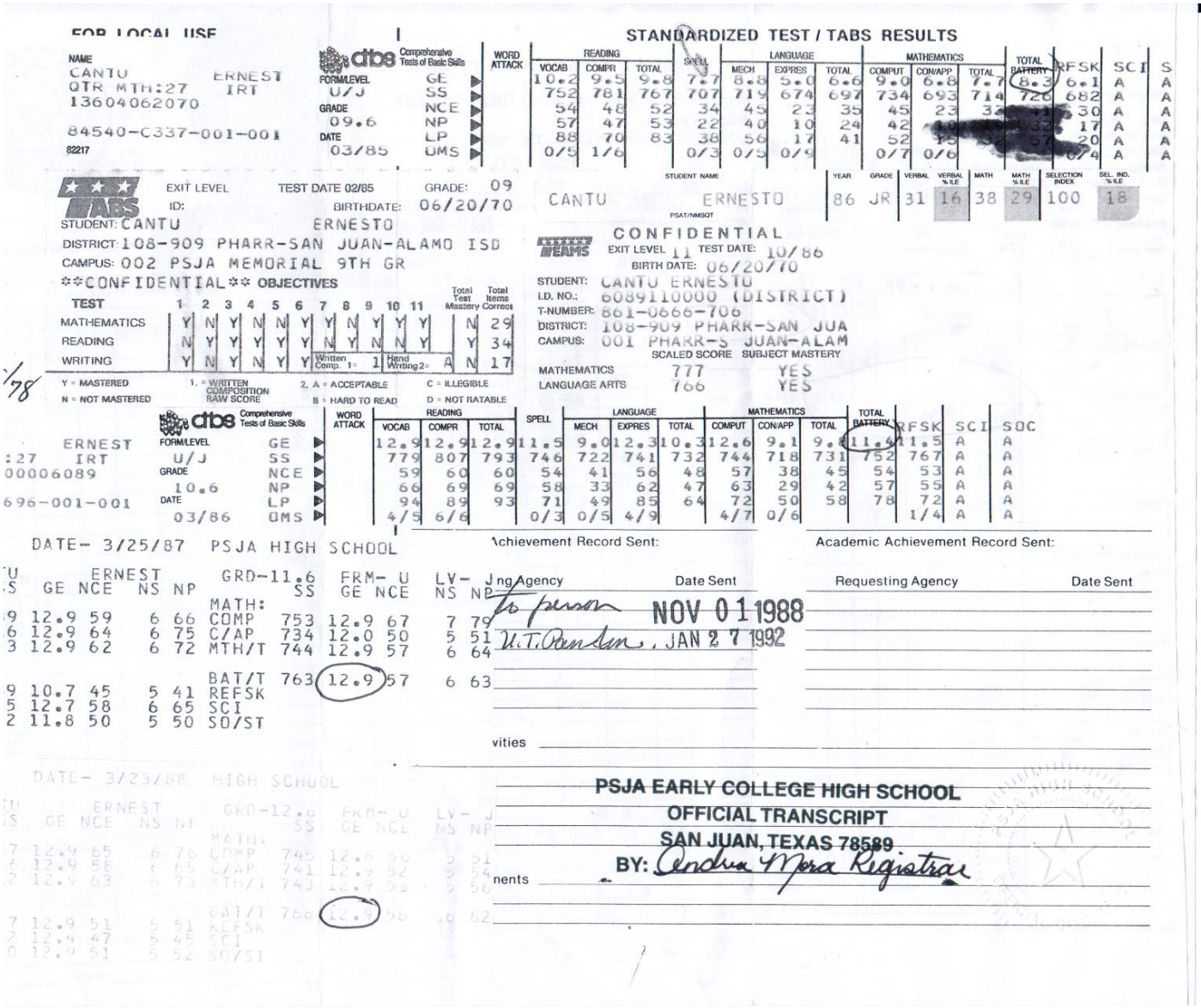
ABBREVIATED COURSE NAME	1ST SEM GRADE	2ND SEM GRADE	Credit
CANCIONERO			
ENG 4	85		0.5
ENG 4		81	0.5
GEOM	79		0.5
GEOM		74	0.5
ECO-FE	80		0.5
US GOVT		76	0.5
PE 1		83	0.5
TYPING		79	0.5
TYPING	84		0.5
PHOTJOUR	87		0.5
DR ED	90		0.5
PHOTJOUR		80	0.5

TOTAL CREDITS FOR YEAR 6.00

YR 87-88 GRADE 12 CUM CREDIT 000.00
GPA 00.0 CLASS RANK
CUM GP 0.0 QTL
REGULAR SCHOOL
YEAR ABSENCES

	1ST SEM	2ND SEM	TOTAL
	3	0	3

ENTERED 09-01-87 WITHDREW — —
REASON
ENTERED — WITHDREW — —
REASON



FOR LOCAL USE

STANDARDIZED TEST / TABS RESULTS

NAME
CANTU ERNEST
QTR MTH:27 IRT
1360406207O

84540-C337-001-001
82217

dbs Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills

		WORD ATTACK	READING			SPELL	LANGUAGE			MATHEMATICS			TOTAL BATTERY	REFSK	SCI	S
FORM/LEVEL	GE		VOCAB	COMPR	TOTAL		MECH	EXPRES	TOTAL	COMPUT	CON/APP	TOTAL				
U/J	SS		752	781	767	707	719	674	697	734	693	714	726	682	A	A
GRADE	NCE		54	48	52	34	45	23	35	45	23	3[illegible]	[illegible]	30	A	A
09.6	NP		57	47	53	22	40	10	24	42	[illegible]	[illegible]	[illegible]	17	A	A
DATE	LP		88	70	83	38	56	17	41	52	[illegible]	[illegible]	57	20	A	A
03/85	UMS		0/9	1/6		0/3	0/5	0/9		0/7	0/6			0/4	A	A

TABS
EXIT LEVEL
ID:
TEST DATE 02/85
BIRTHDATE: 06/20/70
GRADE: 09
STUDENT: CANTU ERNESTO
DISTRICT 108-909 PHARR-SAN JUAN-ALAMO ISD
CAMPUS: 002 PSJA MEMORIAL 9TH GR
CONFIDENTIAL OBJECTIVES

TEST	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Total Test Mastery	Total Items Correct
MATHEMATICS	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	N	29
READING	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	N	N	Y	Y	34
WRITING	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y	Written Comp. 1= 1			Hand Writing 2= A		N	17

Y = MASTERED
N = NOT MASTERED
1. = WRITTEN COMPOSITION RAW SCORE
2. A = ACCEPTABLE
B = HARD TO READ
C = ILLEGIBLE
D = NOT RATABLE

STUDENT NAME	YEAR	GRADE	VERBAL	VERBAL %ILE	MATH	MATH %ILE	SELECTION INDEX	SEL. IND. %ILE
CANTU ERNESTO	86	JR	31	16	38	29	100	18

PSAT/NMSQT

TEAMS
CONFIDENTIAL
EXIT LEVEL 11 TEST DATE: 10/86
BIRTH DATE: 06/20/70
STUDENT: CANTU ERNESTO
I.D. NO.: 6089110000 (DISTRICT)
T-NUMBER: 861-0666-706
DISTRICT: 108-909 PHARR-SAN JUA
CAMPUS: 001 PHARR-S JUAN-ALAM

	SCALED SCORE	SUBJECT MASTERY
MATHEMATICS	777	YES
LANGUAGE ARTS	766	YES

/78

ERNEST
:27 IRT
00006089
696-001-001

dbs Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills

		WORD ATTACK	READING			SPELL	LANGUAGE			MATHEMATICS			TOTAL BATTERY	REFSK	SCI	SOC
FORM/LEVEL	GE		VOCAB	COMPR	TOTAL		MECH	EXPRES	TOTAL	COMPUT	CON/APP	TOTAL				
U/J	SS		779	807	793	746	722	741	732	744	718	731	752	767	A	A
GRADE	NCE		59	60	60	54	41	56	48	57	38	45	54	53	A	A
10.6	NP		66	69	69	58	33	62	47	63	29	42	57	55	A	A
DATE	LP		94	89	93	71	49	85	64	72	50	58	78	72	A	A
03/86	UMS		4/5	6/6		0/3	0/5	4/9		4/7	0/6			1/4	A	A

DATE- 3/25/87 PSJA HIGH SCHOOL

U ERNEST GRD-11.6 FRM- U LV- J
S GE NCE NS NP SS GE NCE NS NP

					MATH:				
9	12.9	59	6	66	COMP	753	12.9	67	7 79
6	12.9	64	6	75	C/AP	734	12.0	50	5 51
3	12.9	62	6	72	MTH/T	744	12.9	57	6 64
					BAT/T	763	12.9	57	6 63
9	10.7	45	5	41	REFSK				
5	12.7	58	6	65	SCI				
2	11.8	50	5	50	SO/ST				

Achievement Record Sent:

Requesting Agency	Date Sent
to person	NOV 01 1988
U.T. Austin	JAN 27 1992

Academic Achievement Record Sent:

Requesting Agency	Date Sent

vities

nents

PSJA EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL
OFFICIAL TRANSCRIPT
SAN JUAN, TEXAS 78589
BY: Cindra Mora Registrar

DATE- 3/23/88 HIGH SCHOOL

U ERNEST GRD-12.6 FRM- U LV- J
S GE NCE NS NP SS GE NCE NS NP

					MATH:				
7	12.9	65	6	76	COMP	745	12.9	60	5 51
6	12.9	58	6	65	C/AP	741	12.9	52	5 54
2	12.9	63	6	73	MTH/T	743	12.9	56	5 56
					BAT/T	768	12.9	56	6 62
7	12.9	51	5	51	REFSK				
2	12.4	47	5	45	SCI				
0	12.9	51	5	52	SO/ST				

APPENDIX C

APPENDIX C

IDEA
Frontier

To the parents of
Juan F. Melgoza
5610 Paredes Line Rd
Brownsville, TX 78526

Dear parent:

Congratulations! Frontier Academy and College Preparatory has selected your child for admission to Frontier as a student in grade 6 for the 2006-2007 school year, pending determination of eligibility.

You will be invited to a parent orientation meeting in the near future. Please be prepared to bring:

Copy of birth certificate
Copy of Social Security card
Copy of immunization record

We look forward to seeing you soon. In the meantime, please spread the word about Frontier Academy and College Preparatory.

Sincerely,

Ernesto Canta
Principal

Roberta Harris
Principal

APPENDIX D

APPENDIX D

Relationships

Community

Mentorship

Meeting local district leaders

As part of my duties, I knew that while I may not be working closely with any of the local traditional school districts, I still wanted to have cordial, professional relationships with local superintendents. Most people fell into one of three camps: anti-charter, pro-charter, or neutral. If they were anti-charter, I would try to move them to neutral by emphasizing that we were there to serve children. This approach did not always work, but by sharing my life story, including growing up in a *colonia* as a proof point that I was in education for the right reasons, I sometimes moved them to being pro-Ernie Cantu or at least not anti-Ernie Cantu by the end of the meeting. That approach worked most of the time, but not always.

I decided to meet with superintendents from the three largest school districts in El Paso County, only two out of three met with me. Of the two that I met, one either became pro-Ernesto Cantu or at least not entirely anti-Ernesto Cantu, and the other continued with his anti-charter and anti-Ernesto Cantu sentiments after the meeting. It was one of the most challenging professional conversations I have ever had because try as I might, I could not get through to him.

I met with this superintendent in a board room at their central office building. As he walked in, he quickly dispensed with any pleasantries and jumped right in with, "Ok,

let's get this over with. Nobody wants you here." I was astounded at his words and struggled to quickly gather my wits and proceed with the conversation I had planned on having.

"Hello Dr. X., my name is Ernesto Cantu. I am the Executive Director of IDEA El Paso. I wanted to take the time to stop by and introduce myself and provide the courtesy of letting you know that we are opening a school in your district. I think we are both here for the same reason-to work for kids."

"Well, nobody wants you here because you work for a for-profit charter school," he responded.

"That's actually not true sir." I continued.

"No, all charter schools are for-profit, and besides, no one asked me about you all coming into the area. I have schools with empty classrooms, and you all are going to take our students."

I realized that the issue was not just his stance on charter schools, but rather a more significant organizational issue he was dealing with that had nothing to do with me; there was no way that I was going to change his mind or his stance on charter schools and possibly me, so I continued cordially and quickly with my talking points and excused myself as soon as I could.

From that encounter, I learned two things. One, sometimes, no matter what I do or say, I won't be able to convince some folks to accept what I am saying, and I must admit that and

move on. Secondly, sometimes I must stay the course regardless of what others say or feel if I know that I am approaching my work from a professional and moral place.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ernesto Cantu was born on June 20, 1970 in Caldwell, Idaho to migrant parents. He was raised in a colonia in south Pharr, Texas called *Las Milpas*. He graduated from Pharr-San Juan-Alamo (PSJA) high school in 1988 and joined the U.S Army after graduating and served his country until 1991 mostly overseas in West Germany, and during Operation Desert Shield/Storm in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Kuwait. Ernesto graduated in 1997 from the University of Texas Pan-American (UTPA) in Edinburg with a Bachelor of Arts in History and a minor in English.

Ernesto has taught 7th grade English Language Arts at Alamo Middle School (PSJA) in Alamo, Texas, GED and ESL classes at Lopez and Segovia State Jails (Windham ISD) in Edinburg, TX, and 6th grade math at IDEA Academy in Donna, Texas. In December of 2004 he received a Master's in Education from the University of Texas Pan-American (UTPA).

Ernesto is currently in his seventeenth year at IDEA Public Schools. During his time at IDEA Public Schools he has been a classroom teacher, Director of New Site Development, Director of Operations/Assistant Principal of Operations, Principal at IDEA College Prep Pharr, which is located in the same colonia, *Las Milpas*. He has been a Senior Vice President of Schools, and most recently, Executive Director of IDEA El Paso. In July 2020 Ernesto received a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership from the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV). He resides at 14660 Long Shadow Ave, El Paso, TX, 79938 and can be reached at ekkantu@msn.com.