

The Unfamiliar Superintendent

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Introduction

The origins of power readily align with the construction of social norms that have restricted women from leadership roles in fields considered to be masculinized. In education, for example, White males have historically dominated the top leadership positions in school organizations. Traditionally schools have been organized along a vertical and patriarchal model, where the White man is more often than not at the top of the organizational structure and minority groups at the bottom (Brunner, 1999, 2000, 2002; Blount, 1996; Grogan, 1996, 2005; Tallerico, 2005).

The number of women employed in the school superintendent role remains scarce, even though research supports the idea that leadership based on women's way of knowing can facilitate equity and more inclusive school environments. The position of superintendent has also been the slowest of all PK-12 administrative roles to integrate women of color (Tallerico, 2002).

In this context, the representation of Latinas in the superintendency has not kept pace with the growing Hispanic population being served in schools. In Texas, there recently were 1,144 school superintendents,

of which 911 were male, 233 female, and only 14 Latina (Texas State Data Center, 2018). Similarly in California, out of 948 school superintendents, 551 were male, 397 female, and only 17 Latina (California Department of Education, 2018). The insufficient representation of Latina superintendents is disturbing, especially since the demographics of schools are drastically and rapidly changing.

According to the 2010 United States Census Bureau, 50% of all Hispanics live in California and Texas and 63% of Hispanics in the U.S. are of Mexican origin. The Hispanic student enrollment in California is 54% (California Department of Education, 2018). In Texas, Hispanic students account for the largest percentage of total enrollment at 52.4% (Texas State Data Center, 2018).

With the rising number of Latino students in school districts across the country, school districts "benefit from leaders who are representative of their community's population" (Ortiz, 2001, p. 58). Given that Latinas are greatly underrepresented in the superintendent position, it is crucial to explore the experiences of Latinas who have been successful in obtaining a superintendent role in order to provide information that may pave the way for others.

The women in this study have been identified as Latina based upon their Mexican American origin and cultural influences. The use of the term Mexican American identifies Americans of Mexican descent and differentiates it from all-inclusive labels such as Latino or Hispanic. The term "Hispanic" is inclusive of all persons of Spanish-speaking descent and Latinx/

Latino/Latina is commonly used to identify persons of Latin American origin, such as from Cuba, Puerto Rico, and South America.

Latinx and Hispanic groups have different cultural and historical experiences in the U.S. Scholars have drawn distinctions between the terms Hispanic and Latino/o and stated that most Latinos see themselves primarily in terms of nationalities, such as Mexican, Cuban, and others, thereby asserting that distinctions when referring to Hispanic groups need to be clarified. The disadvantage of these labels is that they obscure differences between groups. This study focused exclusively on Mexican American women and will provide data needed to challenge the demographic status quo among school superintendents.

Literature Review

Research on gender disparity in the school superintendency is limited and little focus has been placed on women, with even less research on women of color (Rodriguez, 2014). The topic of female superintendents emerged some 20 years ago, exposing gender biases that were prevalent in the search for and hiring of superintendents. These biases have created a variety of barriers for women seeking the superintendent position (Blount, 1999; Brunner, 1999; Grogan 1996; Tallerico, 1999).

The number of female superintendents is substantially disproportionate to the number of women who are qualified for the role. An important finding reveals that female administrators are "women first and administrators second" (Grogan,

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1996), thus substantiating the premise that gender impacts how others perceive educational administration. Grogan concluded that current characteristics of the superintendency are “firmly rooted in traditional male styles” (p. 181).

These studies have provided insight regarding White female leadership but fail to address issues related to women of color. Women of color are aware that they will experience additional barriers compared to their White female peers. These additional hurdles are related to a “politics of fit” and misguided perceptions related to race and ethnicity (Rodriguez, 2014).

Research focused on the experiences of Mexican American female superintendents did not emerge until the late 1990s, thanks then to the contributions of Sylvia Mendez-Morse (1997). She asserted that there was a serious deficiency on this topic in educational research. Her research launched opportunities to view educational leadership from an alternative cultural perspective. According to the *American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial Study*, female superintendents have made inroads in this historically male-dominated position by increasing their numbers to 24% (Kowalski, 2011).

Nevertheless, Kowalski has asserted that women’s “presence in the position does not reflect the diversity of both the national population and the total student population in public schools” (p. 85). Previous studies indicate that the number of Mexican American women in administration was smaller than any other ethnic group (Ortiz, 1981). A more recent study revealed that this trend has not improved and that Mexican American women continue to be underrepresented in all educational administrative positions (Rodriguez, 2014).

Flora Ida Ortiz and Sylvia Mendez-Morse have continued to contribute to the literature regarding Latina superintendents (Ortiz, 1999; Mendez-Morse, 1997). However, few scholars have followed in their steps. The only other available literature that has emerged is in the form of doctoral dissertations (Rodriguez, 2014). It is imperative that this phenomenon continue to be examined in order to expand the dialogue about Latina leadership patterns and the systematic barriers that exist for women of color seeking advancement on the career ladder of PK-12 administrative roles.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in a Chicana feminist

perspective which challenges social inequalities that rest on factors of gender and ethnicity (Grogan, 1996). Feminist scholars argue that gender neutrality in school organizations does not exist. The intersection of race and gender play a crucial role when it comes to women breaking the glass ceiling. Alston (2005) suggests that researchers consider race and gender as a “lens to investigate the intersectionality of lived experiences” (p. 684).

For women of color, race, ethnicity, and gender serve as indirect biases in the selection of superintendents (Rodriguez, 2014). Consequently, Mexican American women experience additional barriers when seeking top educational administrative positions (Mendez-Morse 1997; Rodriguez, 2014).

Chicana feminist ideologies developed in the late 1960s in reaction to the pressures of gender stereotyping and constraints from Chicano men within the Chicana movement. Chicana feminists questioned first-wave feminism by maintaining that for women of color, race, class, and gender subordination were experienced simultaneously and that their oppression was not only by members of their own group but by Whites of both genders. They perceived that Latinas were aware of the disparities they would encounter because of their gender and the color of their skin. Chicana feminism contradicts the stereotype of the passive Mexican woman and has expanded the *movimiento* to include assertive strong Chicanas (Garcia, 1997, p. 18).

Methods

The method of inquiry in this study involved a phenomenological approach that extended beyond casual analysis and explored the personal experiences of Mexican American female superintendents in Texas and California. This phenomenological inquiry is grounded in the philosophical tradition developed by Edmund Husserl (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Husserl referred to phenomenology as the study of how people experience and describe things through their senses. This study portrays a holistic picture of Mexican American female superintendents within the context of the phenomenon. The following questions were addressed:

1. What types of school districts do Mexican American women lead?
2. What have been the experiences of Mexican American women while seeking and operating within the superintendency?

3. What strategies and supports are available to Mexican American women as they successfully obtain the superintendent’s position?

The selection of participants for this study was criterion-based, working from a list of the attributes essential for the study and finding participants matching those attributes. The selection of participants relied on identifying participants who would provide in-depth information related to the questions that guided the study. The collection of data was conducted in two phases: (1) a survey and (2) face-to-face interviews.

The primary source of information for this study comes from the in-depth interviews with Mexican American females who have obtained and served in the superintendent position. This study explored the cultural and social influences that continue to marginalize Mexican American women in a historically male-dominated profession and seeks to assist aspiring school leaders by identifying strategies to overcome the traditional adversities within school organizations.

Findings

There are distinct patterns in the location and types of school districts that Mexican American female superintendents are being selected to lead. These school districts, are small, rural, isolated, and with a large majority Hispanic population, on average 90%. These school districts are viewed as challenging school districts.

If you know the history, this is a very volatile district and in fact when I applied people are like “estas loca” [are you crazy]! I am just like yeah, I am up for the challenge. (R. Robertson, personal communication, April, 2014)

Historically Mexican Americans have experienced discrimination in the U.S. and schools have sustained a history of long-standing customary beliefs that have led to discriminatory practices against Mexican American students. Chicano students have experienced persistent language suppression and cultural segregation. The institutional practice of restricting the use of Spanish as a curricular vehicle was intended to ensure the dominance of the English language and Anglo culture. These historic systematic issues of PK-12 schools served as innate motivation for these Latina superintendents because they wanted to make a difference and do what is best for children.

I was labeled mentally retarded, yeah... My first language was Spanish. There was no bilingual education then, it did not exist...so, I believed that I was retarded. (R. Chavez, personal communication, October, 2014).

Mexican American female superintendents are not being selected to lead school districts with a majority White student enrollment or for school districts that have higher percentages of students within the higher social economic status. Research exposes that perceptions of Latina leadership is matched to restricted contexts.

The notion of "politics of fit" helps to define the environments where Latinas have achieved leadership positions. Latina school leaders are placed in communities that are similar to their own culture and life experiences. Tooms (2010) critiqued the customary perception of "fit" which is commonly used in educational leadership by asserting "that our measures of fit in terms of leadership are one dimensional" and this places limitations on individuals from diverse backgrounds (p. 102).

I think people just began to overlook that I was Hispanic and the fact that I was a woman...I am the first woman superintendent in this community, in fact the first Hispanic.... this community was not about Hispanics especially women in bigger positions in an authority position. (C. Garcia, personal communication, November, 2014).

This study revealed the importance of social capital, sponsorship, and networking for Latina leadership. These strategies assist Latinas in coping with cultural incongruence and the politics of school board operations (Rodriguez, 2014).

I have people I relied on. I picked up the phone and I am not embarrassed to ask questions... she [colleague mentor] brought up some very good points. I took her advice...I had another mentor... and older guy [Hispanic male] ...he said, "you know most people think you are supposed to be ready to take any position, no one goes into any position knowing everything" and that always stayed with me. (E. Adams, personal communication, October 2014).

The women in the study presented themselves as confident Mexican American women capable of navigating any leadership role. Their success is attributed to their personal drive, motivation, and commitment for improving educational opportunities for all children.

I know what I am doing, leave me alone. I will get you to where we need to go...I knew what to do to get ahead and we had some significant gains. (G. Evans, personal communication, September 2014).

The study also revealed that Mexican American female superintendents continue to encounter barriers associated with ethnicity biases. Mexican American women tend to be isolated from other Latina superintendents and in comparison to their White female counterparts they have not been able to break through the glass ceiling—in other words they have a glass staircase to climb.

The inequitable representation of Mexican American female superintendents remains problematic, especially in the face of the rapidly changing demographics of the school population and the impact of those changes on the cultural and societal realities in schools. Researchers have indicated the importance of having administrators of color who can serve as role models for students of color (Ortiz, 1999).

Conclusion

The Mexican American woman in this study exemplify the modern Latina who has defied the stereotypical submissive role and has become, instead, a strong, confident, and assertive woman. This study reveals that personal traits of assertiveness and confidence are advantageous characteristics for Latinas in educational leadership roles.

These superintendents demonstrated determination and are willing to endure whatever ethical challenges the position presents. They have developed a strong sense of self-efficacy as they have ascended a multifaceted educational career ladder and are determined to provide equitable educational opportunities for all students.

These women are aware that they are women of color within a White man's profession. Nonetheless, they consider their ethnicity and gender as an asset to the profession. Latinas in educational leadership continue to contend with issues related to cultural congruency. However, based on the data gathered in this study, it is clear that we have the opportunity to continue to challenge the status quo and traditional perceptions of "best fit" in educational leadership.

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