

# The Latina Superintendent's Ethical Problem Solving for Equity and Justice

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*American schools have been dealt a blow that included a pandemic, economic crisis, as well as racial unrest, initiating an energized charge for social justice advocacy. Our superintendents are currently facing an unprecedented challenge in ensuring that the campus community lives in a fair, inclusive, and opportunity-rich society. However, school systems are notorious for resisting change. This causes moral and ethical dilemmas for the school district leader seeking social justice within all school settings. The equity minded leader's mission is to make a difference in all students lives, but ethical dilemmas heighten as social issues become divisive and combative among communities. In this chapter, the ethical decision making of Latina superintendents are highlighted as they share their experiences of ethical dilemmas related to historical oppressive practices and educational injustices. Some of these ethical dilemmas surfaced when they encountered conflicts among school board members who they perceived as losing focus on best practices for student needs. Each of these women expressed a desire to make systematic changes to historically inequitable school systems. These Latinas were able to remain true to their personal professional standards while confronting adversity. These stories will assist Latina leaders harness their power within, while continuing their crucial activist work for equity.*

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The origin of power aligns with the construction of social norms which have restricted leadership roles to women in fields that have been masculinized. White males have historically dominated the top leadership positions in school organizations within a vertical and patriarchal model; where the White man is at the top of the organizational structure and minority groups at the bottom (Brunner, 1999, 2000, 2002; Blount, 1996;

Grogan, 1996, 2005; Galloway, 2006; Tallerico, 2005). The number of women in represented in leadership roles remains scarce, even though, research supports the notion that leadership based on women's way of knowing can facilitate equity and more inclusive school environments (Irby & Brown, 2002). Furthermore, studies have indicated the importance of promoting leaders of color who can serve as role models for students of color (Jackson, 1999; Nicholson, 1999; Ortiz, 1999). Historically, research on educational administration has often been written by men about men while research on female superintendents has not been extensive (Brunner, 2002; Grogan, 2000; Tallerico, 1999). Most of the research on women in educational leadership spotlights White female administrators and women of color have been unnoticed. Researchers examining school leaders have paid relatively little attention to the life experiences and careers of ethnic minority women and there are fewer researchers of color who explore leadership characteristics of Mexican American female superintendents.

Latinas in leadership have shared personal stories of ethical problem solving when advocating for equitable education (Rodriguez, 2014). This paper provides insight on Latina leadership as it relates to Mexican American cultural identity and ethical dilemmas in educational leadership. The stories of six Mexican American female superintendents are portrayed. These women took charge of their career goals, dared to take risks in educational leadership and are an exclusive group of Mexican American women in a profession that has been governed by White males. Their stories will inoculate other women to overcome the conventional barriers that exist in schools and understand the value of "self" to take charge of their professional goals while making ethical decisions.

## **Framework**

Qualitative feminist research has differentiated ideologies with varying and complex views (Olesen, 1994). Female experiences differ and women of color have experienced complex oppressions, which are not always "understood by white feminists" (Olesen, 1994, p. 160). The theoretical framework for this presentation is grounded in a Chicana feminist perspective which acknowledges that social inequalities exist based on ethnicity and gender. Chicana feminism contradicts the stereotype of the passive Mexican woman and expanded the "Chicano nationalism to include the role of assertive strong Chicanas" (Garcia, 1997, p. 18). Feminist research gives voice to marginalized groups and scholars such as Sprague (2005) contend that gender "in interaction with many other areas like race/ethnicity, class, and ability is a key organizer of social life" and understanding how things work allows feminists to "take action to make the social world more equitable" (p. 3).

Chicana feminist theory recognizes that the intersection of race and gender play a crucial role when it comes to women breaking the glass ceiling (Rodriguez, 2014).

Alston (2005) suggests that researchers consider race and gender as a "lens to investigate the intersectionality of lived experiences" (p.684). Research on Mexican American women exposes barriers associated to ethnicity and gender for women seeking top educational administrative positions (Carrion-Mendez, 2009). Mendez- Morse (2000) identified historical

descriptions of successful Latina leaders and contradicted the atypical stereo types of Mexican American women. Women of color are aware of the disparities they will face because of the color of their skin (Rodriguez, 2014). Chicana inquiry focuses on giving voice to the voiceless and narrating the experiences of women who have been absent from research.

### **Cultural Suppression**

This chapter provides insight on Latina leadership as it relates to Mexican American cultural identity and ethical dilemmas in educational leadership.

The underlying assumption of this study was grounded in feminist theory and viewed through the lens of Chicana feminist thought. The framework of Chicana feminism “looks at inequalities along lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality as they affect women of Mexican descent in the United States” (Gallardo, 1996, p. 1). Texas has sustained a history of individual social injustices stemming from discrimination against persons of color (Valencia, 1991). These were common practices in school systems.

The participants’ stories of personal educational oppression and inequalities exemplifies Valencia’s (1991) concept of Mexican American oppression within an educational system that has historically failed to adequately meet the needs of second language learners. These stories are all too common among other individuals from traditional oppressed groups. These personal narratives give understandings through the Chicana lens and provides a distinguishing perception of ethical problem solving and decision making. These unique stories can influence ethical practices and offers the equity minded leader with the tools to shape equitable practices in school systems.

Social justice principles call attention to these matters and provide groundwork for solving moral dilemmas in the daily practice of equitable outcomes. Sprague (2005) asserted that the interaction of gender, race/ethnicity, and class “is a key organizer of social life” and understanding of how these interactions work will “allow feminists to make the social world more equitable” (p.3). Conversations about race and gender are difficult and uncomfortable for some people, but until these conversations begin, the status quo will remain the same and women of color will continue to face challenges when confronting ethical decision making.

### **Ethical Encounters**

All six superintendents spoke of encountering issues related to the historical segregation and the educational injustices because of the past segregation policies. Historically Mexican American’s have experienced discrimination in the United States and schools have sustained a history of longstanding customary beliefs that have led to discriminatory practices against Mexican American students (Samora & Simon, 1977). Chicano students have persistent language suppression and cultural segregation (Valencia, 1991). 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” (p. 6). Rita’s story exemplifies accepted practice of the historical injustices Mexican American students experienced. Rita described her personal experience of being a Spanish speaker in her formative years and recounted significant events that impacted her personal educational experiences.

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...so I started acting like that [she laughs]. Then they call my mother and my grandmother to the school and tell them I am retarded...mi abuelita, dijo, la única retardada aquí es usted! Mi nieta no tiene nada y la voy a sacar de aquí, [she got up, my grandmother, and said, the only retarded one is you, there is nothing wrong with my granddaughter. I am taking her out of here]. (R. Chavez, personal communication, October, 2012).

The obstacles related to language and the educational inequalities that Rita encountered impacted her desire to work with school districts that matched her cultural experiences and was the motivating factor for their quest to pursue the superintendency. These historic systematic issues of Pk-12 schools were innate motives for improving educational opportunities for all children because they wanted to “make a difference” and do “what is best for children” when faced with ethical dilemmas and problem solving.

### **Latina Activism**

There are distinct patterns in the types of schools Latinas lead. These women asserted themselves as competent change agents. They acknowledged their desire to lead school districts that had historically experienced segregation based on ethnicity and social class. These superintendents demonstrated determination and were willing to endure whatever ethical challenges the position presented. They had developed a strong sense of self-efficacy as they ascended a multifaceted educational career ladder and were determined to provide equitable educational opportunities for all students.

Each of the women recounted personal experiences of oppression and ethnic biases which was the springboard for their internal aspiration to promote equity in schools. These are their stories as they confronted ethical decision making.

Rita Chavez was entering her 3<sup>rd</sup> year as superintendent of schools in a small school district with approximately a 350-student enrollment. She was in a small Mexico border town that had a high poverty rate. She was leading a school that had a majority Hispanic student enrollment 98%. She shared that she had not sought out this position but was recruited by the school board president. She who was in her first superintendency, when she spoke of the community that she was serving, she said, “Prejudice still exists, *hay mucho Mexicana probé y ignórate* [ignorant and poor] ...for those of who say it does not exist, they are lying, it exists.”

Dr. Gabriella Evans was beginning her 2<sup>nd</sup> year of her second superintendency and was located at a rural school district with a majority Hispanic student population, 93%. She shared the need for improving student success “This audit says for the last 12 years nothing good has happened”.

Catherine Garcia was serving her 11<sup>th</sup> year as the superintendent of schools at a small city school district approximately thirty miles south of a large metropolitan city. The student enrollment had a majority Hispanic population, 78%. She said, “I am right in the middle of a community that was racist for so long...it used to be all about the Anglos.”

Dr. Irma Gonzales in her 9<sup>th</sup> year as Superintendent of Schools at a rural school district. The majority student population was Hispanic (65.9%) with the remaining students divided between Anglo (26.7%) and African American (5.7%). Dr. Gonzales disclosed that over her tenure with the school district the student population profile has shifted from an Anglo majority

to a Hispanic majority. Irma talked about the history of segregation in the school district she was leading. She said, “Our community has experienced several years of segregation that has taken place and it influences and impacts generations of families as a result of those experiences.”

Rebecca Robertson was the superintendent of a large urban school district with a majority Hispanic student population 97%. She was ending her first school year as the Superintendent of Schools with a school district that had a reputation of being in turmoil. She explained:

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. I like challenges. They [school board members] were constantly in the newspaper. I swear to God, before I got it. (R. Robertson, personal communication, April, 2013)

Dr. Isabel Salinas was the superintendent of a larger suburban school district and was in her 3<sup>rd</sup> superintendent role. She actively sought a school district that needed improvement. She said “I needed to be challenged. I wanted to learn more... I had been there. I had done that, blue ribbon school, now it is time to move on.” She was leading a school district near the Mexico border with a majority Hispanic population at 99% and 80% economically disadvantaged.

Each of these women expressed a desire to make systematic changes to historically inequitable school systems. They encountered personal dilemmas associated with adverse values, despite that, these Latinas were able to remain true to their personal professional standards while confronting ethical decisions.

Internal ethical conflicts existed within these extraordinary women, as they promoted equitable education for all. These ethical dilemmas surfaced when they encountered conflicts among school board members who they perceived as losing focus on best practices for student needs. School board policy decisions have internal and external functions. The internal function ensures administrative control for the superintendent regarding fiscal decisions about budgets and academic policy and district outputs. Externally, the school board decisions should act in the community’s best interest (Kowalski, 2006). Kowalski stated, “When board members elect to assume administrative duties, conflict between the superintendent and board members becomes highly probable” (p. 125).

## **Latina Values**

Ethical standards “are open to interpretation” and “seldom is there one right answer to complex ethical dilemmas” (Stone, 2017, p. 19). Each of these superintendents demonstrated aptitudes that align with Kitchener’s (1984) five moral principles, autonomy, justice, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and fidelity. These principles establish a foundation for ethical decision making. Two characteristics that were predominately shared among the Mexican American female superintendents were beneficence, promoting good for others and justice, which implies that anyone is entitled to equal treatment regardless of sex, race, ethnicity, or cultural background. (Stone, 2017, pg. 19).

Rita conceded that she had been given directives by school board members that conflicted with her ethical beliefs during her first year as the Superintendent. She declared that these directives were not in the best interest of the children or the community. Rita expressed her discontent with the school board members by saying. “They wanted a puppet and they saw a deer blinded. *Ponte a pensar* [think about it]. You know a woman, over the hill.” She had been

directed by the school board to fire some staff and the motive for this action was “because they did not vote for them. I don’t care what anybody says they buy the votes, they buy the votes, it’s nothing about children, it’s about power”.

At the time of this interview, Rita no longer saw herself as a “puppet.” She had been able to empower herself and begin to contest directives that contradicted her values and that she considered unethical. She said, “Deep down in my heart, I knew what they were doing, but I was too eager. Once I knew better, I put a stop to it.” The board members who had caused her contention were replaced by new board members. She said, “I speak in the past because things have dramatically changed. She eventually redefined her identity as a capable superintendent which empowered her to make efficient decisions which she believed served as the best interest of all students. She was able to successfully navigate the challenges placed upon her and effectively increased the school district’s accountability rating.

Rachel encountered unforeseen opposition from some of the district’s school board members in her ongoing efforts to establish comprehensive school improvements. Rachel disclosed that the challenges that had surfaced were not new to the community. She divulged that when she first began her role as the Superintendent of schools, members of the community advised her that behaviors of some of the school board members were known to be antagonistic, and controversial. It was not in Rachel’s character to avoid conflict and she said, “I had people from the community tell me ‘Don’t take sides, *mieja*, [dear] don’t take sides, you are doing a great job’. I don’t believe in keeping my head down. That is who I am!”

She expressed that the opinions and governance of specific school board members were interfering with ethical decision making:

I swear to God, and it happened so fast. We had worked very hard to establish our relationships, getting them to focus on education [the school board]. It’s about the kids... By April, it was just full-blown politics! I mean it! They forgot about the kids, forgot about everything. It all became ‘me, me, and me’ in just a matter of a week, just like that; it just self-destructed, and I was like oh my, gosh! It was so crazy! (R. Robertson, personal communication, April, 2013)

Rachel described her stance of ethical decision making by stating:

I have my integrity; the day I lose my integrity I might as well get out of here... I follow the law. I follow the rules. I do not do anything immoral or illegal... I will not do things that I am not supposed to do... The day they ask me to do that, we need to part ways. (R. Robertson, personal communication, April, 2013)

It is important to note, that Rachel resigned from her position as the Superintendent the following month.

These women demonstrated a strong sense of self-efficacy toward ethical problem solving and through their words and actions exhibited the characteristics of Kitchener’s (1984) five moral principles, autonomy, justice, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and fidelity.

## Equitable Outcomes

A common vision that existed among the women was making systematic changes to “troubled,” “broken,” or “shattered” school districts. They each expressed their dedication and commitment in improving educational opportunities for students in school districts that had experienced low student performance because of ineffective school systems. The participants had strong backgrounds in curriculum and each one of them expressed their confidence in their ability to improve educational programs for all students. Rita said, “I will tell you I am good at what I do when it comes to curriculum, I know what to do.” Gabriella stated, “I had excellent curriculum experience... I know what I am doing.” Rachel described the drastic changes that needed to occur in her district to be able to improve student performance and meet state accountability standards.

Coming into the district it wasn't broken, it was shattered, it was not to the point that we could grab pieces and try to glue them together. It was literally knocking it down completely and starting from scratch. (R. Robertson, personal communication, April, 2013)

Irma talked about the expectations she required from all her district staff members:

I always tell folks you make decisions in the best interest of kids, regardless of the pressures that come along with it. You are here to represent kids and do what is in their best interest...that has to remain at the central point of everything that we do. (I. Gonzalez, March, 2013).

Each participant spoke of removing staff members because of their inefficiency or inability to fulfill the job requirements. These were difficult decisions for them, but they perceived these actions as a professional moral obligation in their role as an educational leader for educational equity. Each superintendent shared “what is best for kids” were their non-negotiable expectations for administrators, teachers, and all staff members.

Irma said, “You are not going to keep everybody happy. You have to be a risk taker to create change and with change and risk taking comes differences of opinion. That is OK and you got to be comfortable with that.”

Catherine described the administrative changes that have occurred during her superintendency, and she communicated the importance of hiring other administrators who share her philosophy about education.

Over the years I have been able to hire administrators... I knew that there were some administrators that I was not willing to continue working with in this district. I did what I had to do to make sure they went on their merry way...I was very fortunate to bring in administrators of my choosing... and really make sound decisions for children. (C. Garcia, personal communication, March, 2013).

These women were successful in overcoming the adversities in schools that have impeded equity for all. Their voices speak of encounters with customary oppression. Consequently, they challenged organizations' resistant to change and have made a significant presence in leadership roles while suppressing ethical dilemmas when advocating for social

justice in schools. These voices of these exceptional Mexican American female superintendents provide a unique insight of some of the ethical dilemmas that Latina leaders encounter as they purposely lead schools that have been identified as challenging. Their stories will empower other women who aspire to lead schools and whose vision is to be change agents for school improvement.

### **Intersectionality**

Leadership is a continual evolving process, but the integration of external influences can influence the attitude and shaping of the activist seeking to transform perceptions of equitable schools. The study reveals issues of intersectionality of gender and ethnicity that Latinas encounter while advancing into educational leadership positions and for some ethical dilemmas occur when defying systems that have historically marginalized certain groups. This study revealed that Latina leadership is matched to restricted contexts. The notion of “politics of fit” define the environments that Latinas lead, and Latina school leaders are placed in a community that are comparable to their cultural and life experiences. The customary perception of right fit which is commonly used in educational leadership are one dimensional, this measure of fit places limitations on individuals from diverse backgrounds (Tooms, Lugg, & Bogotch, 2010). Gender and race are “powerful factors in the way women have been formed as individuals” and how they confront ethical dilemmas (Grogan, 1996, p. 90). Benham’s, 1997, exploration of leadership practices of women of color revealed ethical dilemmas related to pre-existing overt and passive racism within school systems. As one of his participants stated, “Look at the central office, you can count people of color in decision-making positions on one hand” (p. 295).

This participant added that she had been labeled an “angry Hispanic woman” because of her advocacy for minority children and openly expressing that people of color have limited leadership opportunities in the district (p. 295). These statements affirm ethical dilemmas associated with cultural identity that these five Mexican American superintendents encountered while navigating the educational leadership role. These women forged their cultural identity against mass stereotypes with a strong sense of self.

### **Latina Culture**

Culture is learned and the social environment cultivates one’s culture and shapes their identity. Gonzalez and Gandra (2005) draw distinctions between the terms Hispanic and Latino/o. They state that Latino implies the diversity and brownness among persons of Hispanic origin and “most Latinos see themselves primarily in terms of nationalities, Mexican, Cuban and so forth” thus distinctions when referring to Hispanic groups needs to be clarified (p. 396). The women in this chapter are identified as Latina from Mexican American origin and cultural influences. For Latina advocacy, it is important to understand the cultural influences that Latinas encounter and how they struggle to find their own identity within different contexts of ethical decision making.

The Latina’s main issue has been self- identity (Flores, 1975; Garcia, 1997; Nieto Gomez, 1974; Nieto, 1974; Riddel, 1974). This integration of different cultural dimensions creates identity conflicts for Latinas. The Chicana have challenged the traditional sex-role expectations that have been governed for many years by tradition where the men had the power (Garcia, 1997, Anzaldua, 1987).

I think that there are some Mexican Americans, it depends on where you were brought up and how, but women are not raised to be assertive, Mexican American little girls are not brought up to be assertive, to show leadership skills, maybe the boys are, but not the girls. (Quilantan & Ochoa, 2004, p. 193).

Hofstede (2010) defines culture as the “collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (p. 7).

Hofstede presents aspects of culture as having dimensions, power distance and collectivism versus individualism. Power distance is defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (p. 61). In a collectivist society “the interest of the group prevails over the interest of the individual” (p. 90). Hofstede describes collectivism and individualism social values as opposites. In a collectivist society “the interest of the group prevails over the interest of the individual” (p. 91). In individualist societies “everyone is expected to look after him or herself” and ties among individuals are “loose” (p. 519).

Latinas are raised with collectivist ideals where a woman’s “sense of self is based on affiliation with the group and responsibility to other members of the group, rather than on personal achievement for her own ends” (Trumbull, Rothstein, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001, p. 12). Most people in the world live in collectivist societies, however, the United States has been categorized as an individualist society, where the Latina is cultivated in a traditionally collectivist society. These collective ideals were present in the five Mexican American female superintendents. They expressed that they wanted to “do what was best” for children by working as a “team” and the importance of collaborating with colleagues, school board members, and community members. When decisions by others contradicted their value of collectivism it created morale dilemmas. Rachel spoke of her importance for collective goals and not of focusing on individual goals.

Everything was a team effort, no one did anything in isolation...this is what we need to attack... then politics happened...I mean they [school board] forgot about the kids... Then it all became about me, me, and me. It was no longer about we. (Robertson, personal communication, April, 2013)

### **Latina Leadership**

Latina activists demonstrate a strong sense of self and determination and are willing to endure challenges to eradicate systematic oppression of others (Rodriguez, 2014). Latina leadership provides voice to the “voiceless” and their differentiating viewpoints cultivates collaboration. However, the voices of Latina activism have been silent in leadership roles and Mexican American women are aware of the disparities they will face in leadership roles that have been dominated by men. The stories of these five unique superintendents offers the real- life experiences, knowledge, and perceptions of Latina leaders who have been able construct resourceful ethical – decision making for positive and conclusive outcomes.

## **Self - Efficacy and Confidence**

These narratives show that personal traits of assertiveness and confidence are advantageous characteristics for Latinas in educational leadership roles. These strategies assisted these Latina leaders with coping with cultural incongruence while navigating ethical dilemmas when handling the politics of school board affairs that contradict best practices (Rodriguez, 2014). The superintendent's role is a complex and multi-faceted position. Kowalski (2006) declared that today's superintendents "must wear several different hats if they are to be effective regardless of the type and size of school district" (p. 50). Considering the complexities of decision making and the role-related demands of the superintendent position, it often takes the ability of being fearless and the willingness to take risks to be competent in ethical decision making. The women in the study displayed the willingness to take risks when making decisions for systematic change. Each of the women exhibited an inherent sense of self- efficacy and expressed confidence in their skills and their ability to make sound ethical decisions in their superintendent role. Bandura (1994) defined self – efficacy as "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (p. 75).

Gabriella from an early age displayed confidence in her ability to achieve success, even when faced with opposition. The following statements capture the essence of her confidence in self and her ability to persevere.

I think a very long time ago when I was in high school, I said I was going to get a doctorate degree. I remember the kids would laugh at me when I would tell them that...I said I am going to show them. (G. Evans, March, 2013)

As an adult Gabriella has held on to her sense of self and displays confidence in her abilities to successfully operate within the superintendent role. She demonstrated this during her interview for her current superintendent position. She recalled saying, "I told the board members during my interview, I know what needs to be done and I need you to let me do what needs to be done... I will get you to where we need to go, that's how I am."

Each Mexican American female superintendent expressed confidence in her ability to effectively lead her school district with the commitment to improve education for all children.

## **Increasing Latina Leadership Capacity**

Unshackling the obstacles of Latina leadership is necessary for promoting ethical decision making. A noteworthy cohort of Latinas have successfully reached the upper echelons of administration, political society, and business and have demonstrated the importance of women in today's global development. As more women ascend to senior positions, they are increasingly using their newfound power for a common purpose, to advance other women and advocate for marginalized groups. Networks of women have a profound effect in the increase of presence of women in leadership roles (Rodriguez, 2014). Mexican American superintendents challenge the status quo which is embedded in school systems. They advocate for a better world for all students and question environmental barriers impeding student success (Rodriguez, 2014).

## **Embracing Latina Leadership**

Feminist scholars have argued that women in leadership tend to have power “with” their follower while men tend to have power “over” their followers (Brunner, 1995.) These researchers argue that the genders leadership styles differ, and female leadership comes from socialization. The first and second wave of the feminist movement addressed gender bias and gender role conflicts but was largely a white, middle-class movement. The literature on women of color shows that gender, color, race, and class subordination are experienced simultaneously (Mendez-Morse, 1997, Quilatan, 2002, Rodriguez, 2014). The adversity that women of color face in their lives when confronting social injustices can be daunting. Latina leadership is facilitative and communicative and empowered Latinas understand the value of self when taking charge of ethical decision making (Nieto, 2016, Rodriguez, 2014). Gender research is necessary to end social arrangements which lead women to be viewed as other than and less than.

## **Conquering Gender Bias**

Psychology theory from a de-constructivist position reveals that cultural assumptions are related to social expectations of genders (Hare-Mustin, 1988). These assumptions create social roles based on gender which exists in all societies. The culture of the society determines whether the social determined roles are defined as masculine or feminine. Hofstede, 2010, reported that in most societies “men are supposed to be assertive, competitive, and tough. Women are supposed to be more concerned with taking care of the home, of the children, and take the tender roles” (p. 138). Feminist scholars argue that gender neutrality in the organizations of public school does not exist (Aker, 1992). These gender roles can place dilemmas for women who take on professional roles that have been historically dominated by men.

Mexican American women have overcome the challenge of the traditional sex- role expectations that have been governed for many years by culture and tradition (Quilatan & Ochoa, 2004). The men had the power, and the women were expected to accept the value system created by men and display a subservient role (Anzaldua, 1987). The conversations with these Mexican American women revealed ethical dilemmas related to gender and ethnicity associated to taking on a role that has been customarily masculinized.

Isabel shared her experiences related to gender biases as a woman in a masculinized role. This statement captures her sentiment regarding Latinas in the superintendency:

You can infiltrate and really get to know the good ole boy system... they are going to think like their own, and they are not as willing to give Latinas an opportunity... is very much male dominated still...I think, I am the exception. (I. Salinas, personal communication, March, 2013)

Rita’s story exemplifies her inner conflict regarding gender and ethnicity stereotyping, “I did not sleep my way to the top, that’s important for a woman, because everybody thinks that a Latina sleeps her way to the top. We have not proven ourselves”

These women defy the traditional social pre-existing perceptions of gender roles and ethnicity and demonstrate the ability assert themselves as an effective leader in a male dominated profession. These traits of self-efficacy were displayed as they chose to pursue a career that is

typically dominated by White males, while acknowledging pre-existing biases of women of color, nonetheless, this did not impede their pursuit of their career goal.

### **Navigating Cultural Conflict**

Culture is the “collective programming of the mind that distinguishes members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede, 2010, p. 7). The social environment cultivates and shapes an individual’s identity, and that cultural analysis is the understanding of shared basic norms (Schein, 1992). The voices of the Latina women demonstrate how cultural influences shaped their leadership attributes. Their advice for Latina empowerment is to prepare for an undertaking of an “individualist” approach in their pursuit which means displaying multiple aspects of themselves.

Individualists tend to compartmentalize their relationships and they need detailed background information to get to know new members of their “in-groups” (Hofstede, 2010). Their communication style tends to be brief, direct, and getting their point across. These individualist tactics can contradict the Latina’s cultural identity of “collectivism” which has been endorsed by traditional cultural influences. Some Latinas are accustomed to being recognized before speaking, providing ambiguous and indirect responses, focused on preserving harmony and these types of responses to the individualist will appear as not linked to the topic (Hofstede, 2010).

An individualist approach includes displaying a strong sense of self-efficacy and confidence, which can appear boastful in our Latina collectivist culture and tends to be frowned upon. But this attitude is considered an asset in individualist societies (Anzaldúa, 1987; Hofstede, 2010). The five superintendents presented here asserted themselves during their interactions as confident Mexican American women capable of navigating any administrative role they pursued. They were direct in their responses for student advocacy and proclaimed their competence to move school districts forward.

Two examples are Rita and Gabriela, Rita said, “I am good at what I do...I know what to do.” Gabriella stated, “I had excellent curriculum experience...I know what I am doing.” These women shared attributes of confidence in leadership skills and were able to have a positive mindset for promoting themselves as competent educational leaders.

Their stories are about perseverance and having a strong sense of self-efficacy and confidence in their abilities to inspire and empower others. These Latina leaders expressed their confidence in their ability to advocate and improve educational opportunities for all students. Although the individualist tactics they applied could contradict the Latina’s cultural identity of collectivism, the encouragement to other Latinas was “just do it” and “take a leap of faith”.

### **Latina Empowerment**

Women of color experience, race, class, and gender subordination simultaneously (Mendez-Morse, 2000, Rodriguez, 2014, Nieto, 2016). The conception of power aligns with the construction of social norms which has placed limited access to leadership roles for Latinas. It is advantageous for Mexican American women to build social capital to overcome traditional systemic barriers, social capital can include networking and mentorship (Rodriguez, 2014). Establishing social capital includes learning to assert yourself within contexts that are not familiar to you.

Research shows that self-efficacy acts as physiological strengthening agent (Schwerdtfeger, Konermann, and Schonhofen, 2010). Bandura (1994) defined self – efficacy as “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations” (p. 75). Latina empowerment is the ability to practice positive affirmation to increase self-efficacy and adopt an “individualist” approach when pursuing empowerment. Take charge of one’s significance by asserting oneself with positive affirmations and safeguarding your identity. Assertiveness means being open and direct about how you feel without guilt (Singer, 2010). Positive affirmations are specific and positive statements about yourself and not others. Singer’s advice for promoting self is to practice being comfortable about speaking about your talents, utter your strengths with gusto, power, and conviction, and focus on the here and now.

The Latinas in this chapter had a strong sense of self and confidence as they transformed themselves into effective leadership roles. They acquired skills for speaking about their talents with conviction. They were assertive in their quest to for school improvement and displayed directness without quit when they interacted with those who contradicted their ethical standards for improving educational opportunities to all students.

None of the Latinas in this chapter were willing to compromise their integrity when confronted by ethical dilemmas. These women are examples of remaining true to their core beliefs.

These stories of moral convictions have the potential to inspire others to be effective change agents in schools by practicing ethical problem solving when making decisions for efficient student outcomes. Their authenticity during their advocacy validates the use of power for good.

### **Increasing Social Capital**

Putman (1995) defines social capital as “the features of social organizations, such as networks, norms, and social trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (p. 67). The participants of this study had established an extensive network throughout their administrative career from which they utilized as they sought and obtained the superintendency. These networks included, school board members, community members, co-workers, and family. Ortiz (2001) discussed the importance of personal relationships and strong networks in sustaining communities. Aspects of social capital include trust, cooperation, and collective action which serve as resources for individuals. This relates to Hanifan’s concept of social capital (as cited in Putman, 1995) that community problems can be solved by strengthening the networks of solidarity among individuals by producing an accumulation of social capital.

Irma had established herself in the community where she continued to progress throughout her administrative career. She said, “I think when you remain in the same community it can work for you...depending on the success you have and the relationships you have kept, because along the way there are some tough decisions that have to be made.”

The importance of establishing social capital, according to Ortiz (2001), is that the superintendent, school board members, and the community hold each other responsible for the successful delivery of educational services. It was essential for the Mexican American superintendents to build strong community relations as a mechanism for promoting ethical problem solving for equitable outcomes. These Mexican American women have been able to contribute their unique traits, associated with their personal experiences and cultural influences,

and in turn have become an additional resource to the pre-existing social capital of their community and school district.

## **Mentorship**

The women each shared experience of having support from mentors throughout their professional careers. Kowalski's (2006) defines mentorship as providing encouragement, career related advice, friendship, and/or the development of confidence and trust between a person or persons and another individual seeking mentoring; by comparison, sponsorship is the creation of professional opportunities for others by initiating opportunities that help overcome social and political barriers for certain members of a group. The data analysis from studies has revealed that gender or ethnicity did not reduce the effectiveness of mentorship, but rather the form of support is most beneficial in influencing progression within the educational career ladder (Rodriguez, 2014). Ortiz (2001) demonstrated how Latinas applied the use of social capital for networking. Ortiz defines social capital as developing trust and cooperation "through structures of personal relationships and strong networks" (p. 62).

The voices of Latina advocates are important for promoting social justice. Social justice principles call attention to unequitable social matters. Sprague (2005) asserted that the interaction of gender, race/ethnicity, and class "is a key organizer of social life" and understanding of how these interactions work will "allow feminists to make the social world more equitable" (p.3). The call for advocacy is a call for social change.

These change agents' campaign and lead others by bringing attention to system wide barriers that are related to racial, gender, and social biases. Conversations about race and gender are difficult and uncomfortable for some people, but until these conversations begin, the status quo will remain the same and women of color will continue to face challenges in leadership roles. The exposure of unending customary biases that exist within the organizations of schools is needed if gradual transformation is going to occur. The professional standards of the women displayed in this chapter provides examples of ethical problem solving for equitable educational opportunities for marginalized groups of students. The personal traits these Latina leaders shows other women how to embrace their cultural backgrounds, develop a strong sense of self- efficacy to advocate inspire, and take charge.

## **Take Charge**

Emotional core beliefs influence individual decision making. "When faced with ethical dilemmas or new issues individuals must be able to critically evaluate and interpret the relevant codes, as well as evaluate their feelings as appropriate or inappropriate bases for ethical behavior" (Kitchener, 1986, p. 306). The voices of these determined Mexican American women indicate their willingness to be risk takers and just do it. They were given opportunities to acquire leadership roles that allowed them to be efficient in their daily decision making as they increased their social capital that was needed to move forward in their quests. Their stories are the testament of the capacity to challenge the standard perception effective leadership and the politics of fit. Latina advocacy has a clear understanding that perceptions of leadership are "socially constructed" and the use of the term best fit "has remained stagnant" which places barriers Mexican American women (Tooms, et al., 2010, p.102). The women's stories exhibit, relevant data that demonstrates that constraints for leadership roles continue to exist because of ethnicity

and/or gender bias (Carrion-Mendez, 2009, Quilantan, 2004, Duwe & Mendez-Morse, 2010) However, Latina empowerment is about examining our own perceptions of what leadership looks like, embracing our cultural influence, and influencing others to defy the bias perceptions of what effective leadership looks like.

### **Transforming Power**

Transformational leadership is the ability to empower others. The transformational leader has the capacity to shape and enhance the ability of their followers to nourish a common goal and vision in furthering the collective mission of the organization (Dahir, 2016). This power is about enhancing those less power-full of collective problem-solving abilities among organizational members as a means to influence others when advocating for social justice. One can give voice to the voiceless, by transferring one's power for good, those with power can continue to mentor and sponsor women's advocacy.

### **Harnessing Power**

Mexican American women have overcome the challenge of the traditional sex- role expectations that have been governed for many years by culture and tradition (Quilantan & Ochoa, 2004). The following is an understanding of Latina empowerment. According to Campbell-Evans (1992), "The essence of qualitative research is to explore and understand a situation, issue, or question and to uncover the truth of it. If research is the search for truth and truth in this domain is believed to be a constructed reality, then the interpretation of truth is determined in part by the researcher's view of the world."

Chicana feminists, argue that Latinas face specific cultural barriers which prevent them from gaining all achievements by previous feminist movements. However, recent studies have captured the essence of individual experiences of Latina leadership within the phenomenon and it gives voice to all women (Nieto, 2016, Martinez, 2016,

Rodriguez, 2014). The voices of Latinas include complex intersections of ethnicity, nationality, class, and gender which are contributing factors for to self-identity. This struggle is anchored within the social and political struggles of the Chicano/Latino community at large. Chicana feminists advocate Chicana empowerment. Current Latina leaders have the capacity to empower others by sharing their strategies with mentoring and creating networking opportunities for other women.

Hofstede (2010) presents power distance and gender dimensions in his characterization of culture and defines power distance as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (p. 61). Societies and the culture of the society determines whether the culturally determined roles are defined as masculine or feminine. In general, "men are supposed to be assertive, competitive, and tough. Women are supposed to be more concerned with taking care of the home, of the children, and take the tender roles" (p. 138).

Chicanaism declares that Mexican American women have also been marginalized by their own culture (Garcia, 1997). The men had the power; the women were expected to accept the value system created by men and display a subservient role (Anzaldua, 1987). The Catholic Church has played a key role in influencing these gender role expectations. Nieto (1997) wrote "It has clearly defined the woman's role as that of wife and mother, requiring obedience to one's

husband” (p. 208). The Mexican American women portrayed in this chapter defied traditional sex role expectations that had been governed for many years by tradition and culture. They accepted challenges associated with the complex role the superintendency and the ethical dilemmas related to pursuing equitable education for all. But each woman displayed characteristics of assertive with their decision making and succeeded in making the necessary changes for overall improvements in the school district they led.

The modern Latina have evolved from the stereo-typical submissive role to a more assertive and confident role (Rodriguez, 2014). Ethical problem solving exists within in the Latina advocate’s daily practice. These stories will empower those advocates to remain passionate about their mission or purpose regardless of detours or roadblocks and that impede their quest.

### **Ongoing Research**

The review of literature revealed that few scholars have provided data on Latinas in educational leadership and how they contend with ethical dilemmas while navigating ethical problem solving for positive ethical decision-making outcomes. This is an area that requires continual examination for change to occur (Ortiz, 1997, Mendez- Morse, 1997, Gonzales, 2007. Rodriguez, 2014. Nieves, 2016). This chapter provided the stories of 6 Mexican American female superintendents and gave examples of how they confronted ethical problem solving, however, there is much more to learn from other female educational leaders who have efficiently solved moral dilemmas in their daily practice for equitable advocacy.

The voices of groups of women from historically marginalized groups, such as Mexican American women are important when considering recommendations for ethical practice. Further research is needed to confront the overarching themes of biases related to gender and ethnicity so one can gain an understanding of how cultural congruency relates to ethical decision-making practices for Latinas.

### **Impacting Perceptions of Leadership**

The stories of the six women in this chapter signify that there are well qualified Mexican American women who are proficient in performing ethical decision making. Yet, the percentage of women in educational administrative positions does not correspond with the number of women in the educational work force; less than 20% of women hold the superintendent position in the United States, and the representation of Mexican American female superintendents is much smaller than any other ethnic group (Duwe & Mendez-Morse, 2010; Ortiz, 1981). Latina leaders are chosen to lead distinct school districts. The women in this chapter were located and clustered in a unique geographic area of the state of Texas, out of 1,144 superintendents in the entire state of Texas only 14 were of Latina. Their accomplishments in the superintendent role are isolated and not exposed to others. The notion of politics of fit needs further investigation to understand how gender and ethnicity impact ethical problem solving when advocating for equitable education.

### **Conclusion**

These narratives applaud the accomplishments of six unique women and credits all they have to offer to other Latinas. Their willingness to participate and share their life stories is a

testament of their commitment and dedication to help others. Their success provides hope to the next generation of Mexican American female school administrators. Their stories demonstrate to other Latinas that their dreams of reaching the highest rank of educational leadership can be a reality. Their notable talents have created a positive outlook for the future. They teach others that perseverance, determination, and conviction pay off. They believe that they as (Latinas) do have the ability to influence future generations of school leaders and who can be the catalyst for equitable education.

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