

the shaping of culturally proficient leaders

Three Latina superintendents share the stories of their childhoods, careers and challenges, and their vision to transform schools into places of equity and excellence.

Our careers crossed and converged throughout the years we served as superintendents. When together, we often shared our past histories and discovered how much we all held in common. We were together on many panels to discuss the role of the superintendent and the paths we followed to achieve this goal.

When we finally decided to write our stories with a commitment to help others achieve their leadership potential, we discovered through reflection that our personal and professional lives reflected our approaches to leadership. We met and pledged that we would begin the process of developing our book about leadership, published by Corwin Press in September 2011, titled *Leadership for Equity: A Culturally Proficient Society Begins in School*.

Our personal leadership stories emerged during conversations with Randall B. Lindsey and Stephanie M. Graham, who are renowned for their work on cultural proficiency. During our conversations, we discovered that our early life experiences shaped the leaders we became.

In her foreword to our book, Thelma Meléndez de Santa Ana writes: “These trail-blazing women chronicle their childhoods, careers, and challenges and share their vision to transform schools into places of equity and excellence. Through the lens of cultural proficiency, their stories enhance readers’ understanding of barriers to educational opportunity and equity, conditions that help promote success for underserved students, ways to leverage culture as an asset, and links between high-quality education for some and excellence for all learners.”

Her words were humbling and reinforced the importance of sharing our personal stories in the hopes of inspiring colleagues to join us in this work.

Our personal journeys

We are all baby boomers who lived through major societal changes, including integration, demographic shifts in the nation’s population, and the focus on account-

*By Carmella S. Franco, María G. Ott and
Darline P. Robles*

ability to address achievement gaps. It was clear that as we answered questions about our early years, our years as teachers, our early years as administrators, and ultimately our leadership roles as superintendents, we became bonded in our shared passion and commitment to provide equitable learning opportunities for all children.

Carmella Franco's journey began in Pueblo, Colo., where she was raised in a large extended family that lived within a three-block area where English, Spanish and Italian were the daily languages. When economic necessity caused the family to move to Los Angeles to join her paternal grandparents, she found herself adapting to a new environment. Throughout her childhood, education was emphasized, and the arts were an important component of the experiences her family provided. Franco remembers her early years as having a magical quality.

Maria Ott's journey started in Germany, where she was born Maria Miranda Gutierrez. She was born to a father serving in the U.S. military whose family had immigrated to California from Mexico and a German mother from a farm in a small town in Bavaria. At five years of age, she traveled from Germany to join her father's large extended family in East Los Angeles. Because English was not Ott's first language, she experienced the English learner journey as a child and became a life-long advocate for providing equitable opportunities for children learning English as a second language.

Being raised in diverse environments

Darline Robles started kindergarten as a 4-year-old who experienced several moves during her early school experiences. The moves taught Robles how to adapt and be flexible in new environments. She was raised in diverse settings in which she learned about and came to appreciate many cultures, but also where she experienced and observed cultural biases and insensitivities. For most of her childhood, Robles lived in a single-parent home with a working mother. This situation produced a high level of independence, supported by a loving family that insisted on education as a top priority.

As co-authors, we developed a deep un-

derstanding and appreciation of our shared experiences and those unique to each one of us. We found that many painful situations that reflected our culture, language or female identity were hidden under the exterior of our professional successes. The conversations with Randy Lindsey and Stephanie Graham helped bring the memories to the surface, shaping an important new tool for educational leaders.

A bridge for personal reflection and growth

The Cultural Proficiency Leadership Rubric in our book adds to prior work by Lindsey and Graham and provides a concrete way for educators to reflect on personal beliefs and practices that place an individual or organization along the six-point continuum of cultural proficiency.

Beginning with descriptions of beliefs or practices that might be labeled culturally destructive, the continuum proceeds to describe behaviors that might be considered as cultural incapacity, cultural blindness, cultural pre-competence, cultural competence, and finally, cultural proficiency, where transformation for equity occurs.

The new Cultural Proficiency Leadership Rubric, like rubrics published in other books in the Cultural Proficiency series, is organized around five essential elements: assessing culture, valuing diversity, managing the dynamics of difference, adapting to diversity, and institutionalizing cultural knowledge.

Each element is defined along the continuum, and the rubric serves as a bridge for personal reflection and growth for educators seeking to transform classrooms, schools and school districts to ensure equity for all students. The connection between transforming schools for equity and transforming society for equity is a theme that is reflected both in the rubric and the book.

The Cultural Proficiency Leadership Rubric is a central element of the book, challenging the reader to put on the lens of

cultural proficiency to view his/her own leadership behaviors. The rubric is important to leaders looking at the policies and practices of organizations by providing language to describe unhealthy and healthy conditions.

Each element of the rubric is described across the continuum and serves as an excellent tool for personal growth for the individual leader, as well as a professional development tool for leaders committed to transforming their organizations. Transformation for equity requires a commitment to a dramatic shift from tolerating diversity to

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institutionalizing equity as the worldview for the organization.

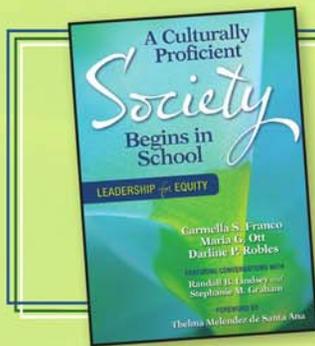
Stephanie Graham asked us to describe some of the challenges that we experienced as women of color administrators. Carmella Franco describes having to work twice as hard and being in constant pursuit of excellence. She also discusses her experience with professional jealousy and with unsupportive supervisors. Franco writes that she "observed that the increase in the number of women in administration has been threatening in and of itself; adding color to it is an additional complexity."

Viewed as a leader who succeeds on merit

Maria Ott responds to the question by describing how others wanted to define her as a Latina rather than a qualified administrator. She writes, "I was proud to be Latina, but I wanted to be viewed as a leader who had succeeded based on merit. ... It has always surprised me when comments are made about increased numbers of people of color at the leadership level. There were few complaints when district leaders were predominately represented by white individuals; however,

As featured
in this month's
issue

Close California's Education Equity Gap with New Resources in Diversity and Social Justice



A CULTURALLY PROFICIENT SOCIETY BEGINS IN SCHOOL

Leadership for Equity

Carmella S. Franco, Maria G. Ott, Darline P. Robles

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Foreword by Thelma Meléndez de Santa Ana

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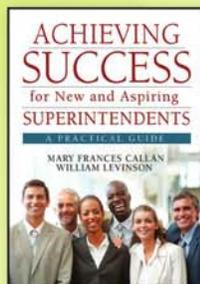
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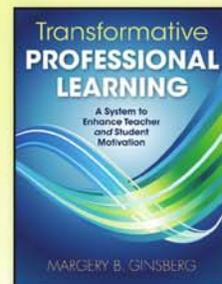
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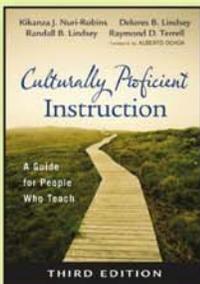
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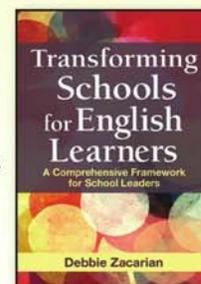
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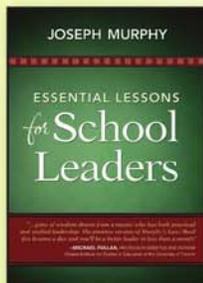


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when too many people of color advance to that level, questions surface regarding the shift in leadership.”

Darline Robles says, “Some people have underestimated me, and had low expectations about my work. That more than anything has annoyed me. When I have accomplished something, some seem to be surprised, as if I, a woman, a Latina, could not do it.”

Randy Lindsey asks the three authors to answer a complex question, “How do women become identified with being in charge, without being identified with negative or unfeminine ways?” Ott answers: “Women must not hesitate to show their strength in leadership roles. Women should know their personal compass well so that they are consistent in their focus and clearly articulate their passion for creating successful educational environments for all children. Others look for consistency in the behavior of their leaders, and not being clear about what you stand for is one of the reasons that others will not follow. It is better to have disagreement with your priorities than to be someone who wavers in his/her beliefs.”

Robles answers the question directly, “You just lead. I don’t think you can worry about how you will be identified or else you will be stuck and not move forward. People will always have an opinion about you – correct or not. As a leader, you must be who you are, be authentic. It is interesting how language will be used differently to describe a woman’s commitment to her work. Often I would hear others describe it as being emotional rather than passionate about making sure students who have been underserved for too long are provided with strong teachers to ensure they have access to quality education. I always welcomed the opportunity to provide alternative language.”

Franco said, “Obviously, women need to learn to play with the ‘big boys,’ but I don’t interpret this as ‘acting’ like them. That being said, I believe that there are distinctive ways that both men and women in leadership roles portray themselves: conducting business in a conservative and serious manner, being viewed as a business leader, in charge of a multi-million dollar operation, dressing appropriately for the position.”

Franco continued, “The issue of negative perceptions of women being in charge will be there as long as there is a dearth of women in top CEO positions. This has been a hard wheel to turn, and it continues to move very slowly. The logical interpretation is that women are not viewed as being able to run a major business; consequently, men continue to be named to those positions.”

Improving student achievement

The fact that we shared the experience of being women in leadership roles – Latinas that encountered stereotyping and biases regarding our professional potential – brought



the three of us closer as friends and professional colleagues. We all have successfully improved student achievement and provided important leadership in both mid-sized and large districts.

Franco’s career as superintendent of Whittier City Schools for 12 years, retiring in 2008 to immediately assume the role of interim superintendent for Woodland Joint Unified, prepared her to serve as the first state trustee, with full authority over the school board, assigned to a district for academic performance issues. She is starting her second year in the Alisal School District with the goal of leading the district back to independence from state oversight.

Ott served seven successful years as superintendent in the Little Lake City School District, leaving in 2000 to work beside Roy Romer in stabilizing and leading the Los Angeles Unified School District as the senior deputy superintendent. In 2005, she was appointed to lead the Rowland Unified School District. The district has initiated major transformational work around teaching and learning and continues to be recognized as a cutting-edge district.

Robles led the Montebello Unified School District before accepting the position of superintendent of the Salt Lake City School system, where she served for eight years. In 2002, she was appointed as the first Latina to lead the Los Angeles County Office of Education. Robles retired in August 2010 to develop a master’s program in school administration at the University of Southern California. As a faculty member, Robles is positioned to influence the quality and content of preparation programs for educational leaders at USC and universities across the nation. She was recently appointed to the President’s Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanics.

The conversations modeled and encouraged in this book take courage and the ability to open one’s thinking to a new awareness level related to cultural proficiency. We have the opportunity to have courageous conversations that will break down barriers to success for historically underserved students, closing gaps and providing educational access. But we must first be willing to identify priorities and create conditions in schools and districts that remove the inequities that are microcosms of inequities in society.

All boats rising

Our book is designed to help you begin important conversations about educational equity. We invite you to use our stories and the questions we pose to lead for equity so that opportunities and achievements increase for all students, especially for students who are underserved by present and past policies and practices. As asserted by Thurgood Marshall, the improvement of opportunities for those least well served in our society results in “all boats rising.” ■

Carmella S. Franco is a state trustee appointed to oversee the Alisal UESD. Maria G. Ott is superintendent of Rowland USD. Darline P. Robles is a faculty member at University of Southern California, where she developed the master’s program in school leadership. She is also a member of the President’s Advisory Commission on Educational Excellence for Hispanics. They are authors of the new book, “Leadership for Equity: A Culturally Proficient Society Begins in School.”