

EXTRAORDINARY WOMEN IN TEXAS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF MEXICAN AMERICAN FEMALE SUPERINTENDENTS

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Introduction

The Mexican American woman's ability to access the superintendency is not keeping pace with the increase of the Hispanic population. In 2010, 63% of Hispanics in the United States were from Mexican origin and as of July 2011, 50% of all Hispanics lived in California, Texas, and Florida, with Texas having the second highest Hispanic population of 9.5 million (United States Census Bureau, 2010). By 2020 the Hispanic population in Texas is expected to outnumber the White population (Texas State Data Center, 2008). With the rising number of Latino students in school districts across the country school districts would "benefit from leaders who are representative of their community's population" (Ortiz, 2001, p. 58). At the time of this study, there were 1, 144 superintendents in Texas, 911 were male, and 233 were female and only 14 were Latina. Considering that Latinas are greatly underrepresented in the superintendent position, it is critical to study Latinas who are currently in superintendent positions to pave the way for others. This study portrays the voices of seven resilient and persistent Mexican American female superintendents who are contributing to the future of education.

Obtaining the superintendent position for women has been difficult and is the "slowest of all K-12 administrative roles to integrate women and people of color" (Tallerico, 2000, p. 1). This phenomenon has drawn some attention by researchers to examine women in their quest for the superintendency. However, these studies do not explain the underrepresentation of Latinas in the superintendency and Mexican American women as a group have gone unnoticed. The lack of

research on this group is related to the low number of Mexican American female superintendents. Mendez-Morse (1997) declares this lack of research as a “serious deficiency” (p.126). 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). Women from certain ethnicity groups, such as Mexican American and African American experience additional barriers when seeking top educational administrative positions (Mendez-Morse 1997). Not only is gender an issue but race and ethnicity are some of the hidden biases in the selection of superintendents (Tallerico, 2000).

This study provides the necessary data on Mexican American female superintendents that is needed to challenge the status quo. This study provides data on an ethnic group with a shortage of relevant research. The term Latino/Latina is commonly used to identify persons of Latin American origins, such as Cuba, Puerto Rico, and South America. These ethnic groups have different cultural and historical experiences in the United States. The disadvantage of this label is that it obscures the distinction between groups (Niemann, 2000). This study focused on Mexican American women and provides an understanding and clear distinction among this group within the Hispanic/Latino classification.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in a Chicana feminist perspective which “recognizes that there are social inequalities which rest on gender differences” (Grogan, 1996, p. 21.) Grogan (1996) has set the stage for future feminist research by guiding others to see an end to social arrangements which lead women to be “other than, less than, put down, and

put up” (p. 21). Feminist scholars argue that gender neutrality in organizations, including public schooling, does not exist (Aker, 1992). The central commitment of feminist research is the call for progressive social change (Sprague, 2005).

Women of color are aware of the disparities they will face because of the color of their skin. Chicana feminist ideologies developed in the late 1960’s from the pressures of gender stereotyping and constraints from Chicano men within the Chicana movement. Chicana feminists questioned first wave feminism by maintaining “for women of color, race, class, and gender subordination are experienced simultaneously and that their oppression is not only by members of their own group but by whites of both genders” (Hurtado, 1989, p. 839). 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).

Methods

The method of inquiry was a phenomenological approach that extended beyond casual analysis by seeking out the voices and personal experiences of Mexican American female superintendents in Texas. This phenomenological inquiry was grounded in the philosophical tradition developed by Edmund Husserl (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton, 2002). Husserl referred to phenomenology as the study of how people experience and describe things through their senses (Patton, 2002). The intent of this study was to portray a holistic picture of each individual experience within the context of the phenomenon. The following questions were addressed:

1. What have been the experiences of Mexican American women while seeking and operating within the superintendency?

2. What factors motivate Mexican American women to seek the superintendent position?
3. What strategies and supports are available to Mexican American females as they seek and retain a superintendent's position?

This study explored the cultural and social influences that continue to marginalize Mexican American women in a historically male dominated profession. The results of this study enhances the understanding of how some Mexican American women are able to overcome the traditional adversities of school organizations and successfully obtain the ultimate career goals for the superintendency.

The selection of participants for this study was criterion-based, described by Merriam (2009) as a “list of the attributes essential for the study and finding a unit matching the list” (p. 77). The selection of participants relied on potential participants who would provide in-depth information regarding the questions of the study. Creswell (1998) reiterates the importance of selecting participants who can articulate their conscious experience of the phenomenon being explored where the participants of the study represent people who have experienced the phenomenon. The collection of data was conducted in three phases: (1) surveys, (2) face to face interviews and observations, and (3) document review and field notes. The primary source of information for this study came from the in-depth interviews with Mexican American female superintendents. The study portrays a holistic picture of each individual experience within the context of the phenomenon.

Findings

The inductive analysis of data revealed similar experiences among the women. The prominent themes which emerged from the data analysis included racism, cultural congruency,

gender stereotypes, district appeal, and school board politics. The participants of the study shared a number of common characteristics and personal traits. They demonstrated personal attributes of self-efficacy and confidence, resiliency, determination, and perseverance, and commitment and dedication.

There are distinct patterns in the location and types of school districts that Mexican American female superintendents are being selected to lead. The locations of the school districts that the seven Mexican American female superintendents lead are unique and isolated from other areas of the state of Texas. The women often spoke of their how their cultural backgrounds influenced their desire to seek school districts that were culturally congruent with their life experiences. The women demonstrated competence in leading what some may consider challenging school districts. Their success is attributed to their personal drive, motivation, and commitment for improving educational opportunities for all children.

Their stories corroborated the importance of mentorship, sponsorship, networking, and social capital in gaining access to the superintendency. The additional support systems that these superintendents relied on while operating the superintendency included support from family and professional colleagues. These support mechanisms assisted them in coping with cultural incongruence and the politics of school board affairs. The participants in this study asserted themselves as confident Mexican American women capable of navigating the superintendency role. The strategies and skills that the participants depicted in this study will provide aspiring Mexican American female superintendents with a foundation for preparing themselves for their search for the superintendent position.

Conclusion

A vast amount of insight was obtained as result of the study. It adds awareness pertaining to the shortage of representation of Mexican American female superintendents. Each of the women hadset their goal of pursuing the superintendency early in their administrative career. The participants in the study discussed common barriers as they moved up the career ladder within the educational organization. The participants represented in this study had developed a sense of self and they are comfortable with the fact that they are women in a male dominated profession. Each of the participants viewed their gender as an asset to the profession, and they were comfortable with the fact that they are the chief executive officer of a school district. Making systematic changes to the pre-existing systems that failed to meet the needs of all students proved to be challenging and they encountered road blocks related to power and control from school board members. These road blocks did not discourage the women and they represented themselves as possessing the courage to do whatever was necessary to ascend into the superintendency and the courage to make systematic changes to improve educational programs for students despite resistance from others.

This study revealed the impact of cultural influences for Mexican American women and how those influences shaped their leadership attributes which steered their decisions for seeking the superintendency. Tallerico (2000) spoke about the “unwritten rules” in screening practices by search consultants and how the “hypervaluing of the interpersonal chemistry” between the superintendent candidate and school board members places ambiguities for women of color who are not like the hiring panel (p. 108). Tooms, et all (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). The participants in this study did not speak of seeking the superintendent position in other areas of the state and they shared their assumption that some school districts would consider them less desirable candidates. My presumptions are that the common notion of “best fit” or “best match” for certain communities create barriers for other aspiring Mexican American female superintendents.

The overall intent of this study is to change the mindset of individual biases related to gender and ethnicity and impact perceptions of search consultants and school boards as they seek and recruit superintendents to lead their school systems. The real world experiences, knowledge, and perceptions of these Mexican American female superintendents will be a positive contribution to the current theoretical perspectives of educational leadership. These seven Mexican American female superintendents bring to the superintendent position resources associated with their gender, ethnicity, and personal traits. This study provides educational leadership programs with a new perspective regarding the preparation of Latina educational leaders. The experiences of these women challenge the traditional perceptions of what a school leader looks and acts like. My hope for this study is that search consultants will use the data from this study to train school board members to take risks, stray away from their “security blankets,” and to gain an understanding of the cultural traits Mexican American women possess and how their cultural influences shape their leadership characteristics.

Limitations

Although this study yielded rich detailed experiences of seven Mexican American female superintendents, it cannot be assumed that this phenomenon is representative of other Mexican American women, nor other women of color. The study was from the lens of an individual researcher with a Chicana feminist perspective with preconceived biases, thus a researcher with a

different background most likely would interpret the data from a different perspective. Denzin (2009) insists that “stories can always be told in different ways” and “all texts are biased productions” (p. 99). The practicality is that there cannot be an absolute unbiased interpretation of what I deem as impressive stories from unique women.

The Mexican American woman in this study exemplified the modern Latina who has defied the stereo-typical submissive role and has become, instead, a strong, confident, and assertive woman. The participants of this study exhibited personal traits of assertiveness and confidence which are advantageous characteristics in educational leadership.

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