

Con todo mi corazón:
Mentoring Latinas in Educational Leadership Doctoral Programs

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Abstract

Personal narrative essays were used to analyze the experiences of four Latina doctoral students who completed their first year in an educational leadership doctoral program in a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) in the southwestern U.S. Four themes emerged from their *testimonios* 1) *Con todo el corazón*; 2) *Somos como una familia*; 3) *Hermanas aren't just doing it for themselves*; and 4) *Echando pa'lante*. These themes demonstrate tenets of Latina/o educational leadership through the community-mentoring practices described in the study.

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of four Latinas in a doctoral program in educational leadership at a Hispanic Serving Institution in the southwestern U.S. Two were practicing principals, one was an aspiring principal, and one was aspiring to a career in academia. It is important to focus on the academic success of these women given that only 1,563 of doctoral degrees earned in 2014 were earned by Latinas out of the almost 25,000 doctoral degrees earned by women nationwide that year (National Science Foundation, 2014). When it comes specifically to doctoral degrees earned in educational administration, only 6.8% Hispanics, both male and female, earned such degrees when compared to 60.2% White males and females (National Science Foundation, 2014). Such disheartening statistics can be remedied, in part, by retaining Latinas in doctoral programs.

Mentoring Latina doctoral students toward program completion is crucial given that they represent a demographic that has low representation in academia (Turner & Myers, 2000) with just a little over 1,600 of them serving as full professors in degree-granting institutions in 2011 compared with over 44,000 White women professors (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). That means that out of the almost 53,000 female professors nationwide only 0.03% were Latina compared to 83% White women. It is important to consider Latina doctorate production

and the overt and covert marginality (Watford, Rivas, Burciaga, & Solorzano, 2006) that these women experience in their doctoral programs. Socialization practices (Gardner, 2008) to help retain Latina doctoral students include offering research support, developing strong working relationships with faculty, maintaining professional networks, and engaging in scholarly productivity. The researcher based her work on two primary research questions: (1) To what extent did mentoring play a role in supporting Latina educational leaders? (2) In which ways did Latina educational leaders benefit from mentoring practices?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study, based on the three dynamics of Latina/o leadership as discussed by Bordas (2001), are: a) *personalismo*-establishing self-awareness and finding identity that influences actions, b) *tejiendo lazos*-literally translates into weaving connections and looks at the aspect of building community, and c) *desarrollando habilidades*-skill development based on the first two dynamics. Through her description of these three dynamics, Bordas (2013) emphasizes the importance of “community” in Latina/o cultural practice. She attests that Latina/o leaders are simultaneously “community builders” and “community scholars” (Bordas, 2013, p. 116). This is clearly connected to research conducted by Hernandez, Murakami, and Quijada Cerecer (2014) who found that the Latina/o educational leadership practices of a Latina principal were influenced by her cultural background, experiences, and interactions with the school community. In further work Hernandez and Murakami (2016) discussed the value of culturally relevant leadership within Latina/o communities. It is through the community concept as identified by the aforementioned researchers that I integrate this component of Latina/o educational leadership within this narrative. This narrative provides a discussion of mentoring relationships between Latinas in an academic community.

In his qualitative study of Latina doctoral students, González (2006a) identified the critical role of mentors in assisting Latina doctoral students as they navigated their graduate experience. Similarly, a study of Latina junior faculty by Ek, Quijada, Alanís, & Rodríguez (2010) described the need for mentoring to extend beyond the doctoral program and into the lives of Latinas in the academy whose representation in the faculty ranks remains one of the lowest among ethnic groups. Such supportive practices can help students to hone their scholarly

potential (Dalia & Castellanos, 2006) into future endeavors within academia or within educational organizations like schools and institutions of higher education as administrators. In this manner they can make contributions to their communities to help improve academic attainment and achievement for students in those communities.

Background

The four doctoral students involved in this study attended a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) in the southwestern United States. At the time of the study the institution served almost 30,000 students in over 140 degree programs. The students in this study developed their personal narrative essays during their second year of coursework in the educational leadership doctoral program at this HSI. The program had been in existence for almost 20 years. A unique aspect of the program is the cultural core requirement which focuses nine hours of required coursework on research about traditionally underserved students. Most students in the program enroll in 6 hours each semester while they work full-time. A few students completed the program through full-time study as doctoral research fellows who enroll in 9 hours each semester. In the study discussed in this manuscript, three of the Latina doctoral students were completing their program while working full-time. Two of the women were campus principals and one was a department chair on the science team at her school. Only one of the women in the study was a full-time student and research fellow.

Method

Personal narrative essays (Nash & Bradley, 2011) were used to obtain the experiences and perceptions of four Latina doctoral students. The use of personal narratives was a method of collecting data based on the participants' essays. Such essays allowed the voices of the participants to come through in a sincere and unique manner. The purpose of this study was to identify the ways in which mentoring and socialization into doctoral education were approached by the participants, all women of color (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001). The writing of these essays was only conducted with four Latinas who shared the same academic advisor. Given that the Latinas in this study engaged in a reflexive narrative based on their own stories (Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012), the use of *testimonios* was the medium for analysis in this study. The findings presented in this paper are intended to focus on the *testimonios* (Delgado Bernal,

Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2009; The Latina Feminist Group, 2001) of the four doctoral students reflecting on their first year of doctoral study then looking toward the future. The students belonged to two different cohorts within the educational leadership doctoral program in a Hispanic Serving Institution in Texas. All of the women self-identified as Latina (González & Gándara, 2005). In the next section, each of the participants will be briefly described, with the use of pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Las mujeres

Dalia and Lucia were elementary school principals. At the time the women wrote their personal essays, Dalia was beginning her second year as a principal and Lucia was a veteran principal. These women were strongly rooted in their school communities and they consistently worked to support the educational outcomes of the traditionally underserved student populations in their schools. Margarita was a high school science department chair who was pursuing principal certification concurrently with the doctoral program. She aspired to lead her own school one day. Esperanza was a doctoral research fellow who left a high school mathematics teaching position to pursue her doctoral coursework full-time. She was considering joining the ranks of academia after completing her degree. Thus, her research fellowship allowed her opportunities to participate in the academic threshold through scholarship and dissemination of research.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected at the beginning of the participants' second year in the doctoral program. The personal narrative essays were coded using first-cycle and second-cycle coding (Saldaña, 2013). During the first cycle I read the essays in a general manner familiarizing myself with the words of the participants and the style in which they wrote them. I took notes on what I felt that the participants were conveying. For the next coding cycle I analyzed the data applying the framework of Bordas (2001) to explicitly look for themes that reflected the three dynamics of Latina/o leadership. The findings discussed in the following section are grouped into the four themes that emerged from the analysis of the data: 1) *Con todo el corazón*; 2) *Somos como una familia*; 3) *Hermanas* aren't just doing it for themselves; and 4) *Echando pa'lante*. These themes highlight the reflections and actions of the four Latina doctoral students through

mentoring and socialization and are key findings. The voices of the participants will be presented within the aforementioned themes through *testimonio*.

Findings

The first theme that will be discussed in this section focuses on the value of caring relationships that the participants engaged in during their first year of doctoral study. It was evident that the relationships between the women and those whom they named as mentors were rooted in a strong sense of commitment and dedication to each other's success.

Con todo el corazón

In their essays, each of the women mentioned their dissertation advisor, another Latina who serves as advisor for all four women, as a source of caring and support. Dalia, a second year principal stated,

Dr. Corazón is a strong, passionate, and dedicated Latina who I truly admire. She is my hero and when I grow up I want to be just like her. She is always there when I need her. I know that she believes in me and would not let me fail.

In this description of her relationship with her faculty mentor, Dalia expressed evidence of the commitment displayed by her faculty advisor. She also explained how these actions have given Dalia inspiration and motivation in her doctoral program and for her future. Likewise, Margarita, an aspiring principal, also referred to the dedication expressed by her dissertation advisor regarding assistance, "Once I told her what my goals were, she took the time to outline each step of the doctoral process and has helped me create a realistic timeline to graduate ...". Margarita clearly appreciated the time taken by Dr. Corazón to assist her in a dependable manner. Margarita continued by writing, "Although I attend a large university, I do not feel like another number because she treats me as if I am a valued student with the potential to impact educational research." This reflects the value of relationship-building in maintaining a supportive network.

Esperanza also reflected on her relationship with the same dissertation advisor. She began "Dr. Corazón understands me. She has validated my concerns and helped me through them." However, this wasn't the experience that Esperanza had when she was working on her master's degree:

When I was at [a Research One institution], I remember going to faculty or even to my mentor with my concerns. I remember one time I even cried in front of my advisor because my cousin had passed away. He told me, 'I've seen how students play this game.' Wow! I felt terrible and slowly I closed up ... but now that things are different I see that [Dr. _____] really cares and that surprises me.

Esperanza's recollection about the troubling encounter with the faculty member at the elite institution is reminiscent of the accounts shared by other Latina doctoral students in the González (2006b) study who also voiced feelings of oppression.

Moving from the connections between mentor and mentee, Lucia, an experienced principal, considered her calling to the students that she serves. She explained, "As a Latina principal, I understand the academic needs of minority students and their families. My objective is to use my personal and professional experiences to improve the chances for minority students to achieve the goals that they set for themselves in life." In this manner, she expressed how she clearly made the needs of the students on her campus a top priority. All four participants discussed the importance of being selfless and dedicated when it came to mentoring relationships. In essence, it is about the love and care that is sincerely shown to students that makes a difference in their lives.

The term love is being used in this manuscript based on work by Calafell (2007) who discussed her experiences with supportive mentors who demonstrated loving actions in professional ways such as taking time to talk outside of classes and writing words of encouragement on her papers. This theme in the current article reflected the voices of the four participants through the frame of love having its rightful place in the world of academia when it comes to relationship building. The work of hooks (2002) took a deeply personal look at the ways in which women search for love within themselves and among each other. She describes the journey toward love as a source of liberation, a space where women can truly find their inner selves. The aspect of love that I refer to in the mentoring relationships that the four Latinas and their mentor experienced is one that is almost familial. This speaks to the role of *academic aunting* as posited by Ellingson and Sotirin (2008) where the authors elaborated on the importance of relationships through (wo)mentoring. In this vein, the following section will illuminate the Latinas' voices regarding peer relationships.

Somos como una familia

All of the participants formed part of a doctoral cohort. This model had been consistently used in the program, and it serves as a way to help students build a community. Without prompting, each of the women discussed, in their personal narrative essays, the ways in which members of their cohort were like family to them. Specifically they described the close bonds that they had built between the other women in the study.

Margarita referred to the camaraderie of her cohort members: “Our diversity in our character traits, work ethic, and social outlook in life significantly impacts the dynamic interaction of our group because we bring balance to each other.” She added, “Having them [the other Latina participants in this study] when times are tough has made a huge difference in my success in this program.” As one of the cohort members who Margarita was describing, Dalia described the connection to her cohort members who have become like her “sisters”: “I have really bonded with them. They have become like a second family to me because we are there for each other.” Both Margarita and Dalia commented on the importance of *sisterhood* or *hermandad* (Bettez, Kier Lopez, & Machado-Casas, 2009) as an important peer relationship strategy. The sense of kinship that was expressed by the study participants demonstrates the importance of supportive endeavors within academic study.

In the same way, Lucia expressed her connection to the other women: “Part of getting through the first year of study has been because of the encouragement, contribution, participation and commitment of peers to my academic success.” Esperanza, a doctoral research fellow, also reflected on her connection with one of her cohort members who was not part of this study: “We share the struggle of going through the doctoral process together. When I’m down, Guadalupe reminds me of the positives in my life. She brings perspective and seeks help FOR [emphasis by Esperanza] me. I trust her very much and lean on her often.” All of the women described the significant role that being a member of a cohort yielded. They felt that they were not alone in the journey. Being able to turn to others who shared both their dreams and fears was one of the most valuable aspects of the doctoral program.

Dalia, now in her second year as an elementary school principal, referred to both formal and informal mentors as *familia*. She stated, “My *familia* continues to be my ultimate system of support or mentorship that influences the way I think, act, and perform.” She continued, “As a Latina principal, I follow the mentorship from great women ... whose actions and successes

have been untold. To me, my ways of knowing pay homage to them ...”. In this manner, Dalia offers her gratitude for those mentors who have paved the way before her. She understood the contributions of each of these persons in her own success.

Lucia also used the Spanish term for family when referring to her dissertation advisor: “I feel as though I am part of her *familia* and with family we always want the best and have their best interest at heart. She has taken me under her wing and has a real, authentic, vested interest in me. I do not know if she intentionally thought she was going to take me under her wing as a mentee, but for me I felt it just naturally turned out that way.” Lucia explained the sense of family that she has experienced with her dissertation advisor. Thus, family members can come in many forms and not necessarily just blood relatives.

In this discussion of theme of family, all of the participants discussed their connections to others within their cohorts and inner circles. This demonstrated the importance of generating a sense of belonging for Latinas in graduate programs (Winkle-Wagner, Johnson, Morelon-Quainoo, & Santiago, 2010). Perhaps it was through their own participation in cohorts and in peer relationships that the four Latina doctoral students in the current study demonstrated their own acts of selflessness in reaching out to others. The following theme that will be presented focuses on the women’s ways of engagement with their dissertation research topics and how these works may contribute to enhanced educational opportunities and outcomes for students of color.

Hermanas Aren’t Just Doing It for Themselves

Given that a goal of this doctoral program is to enhance the social justice leader in each student, the type of research conducted and who was included as a participant were key. Within their personal narratives, each of the women reflected on their selected topic for dissertation research. They were asked to consider the reasons why they were engaging in this type of scholarship. In the following section the rationale for the women’s selection of dissertation topics will be discussed based on their own experiences as students and educators.

Esperanza is a full-time doctoral fellow who previously served as an advanced mathematics high school teacher. Thus, her research focus is on college-age Latinas successfully navigating the STEM educational pipeline. She stated “I want to gain access to the experiences that help Latinas persevere. Perhaps it may be a connection to how they will help the world and

others through their career.” Esperanza’s own college-going experiences at Ivy League universities helped her gain an understanding of the marginalization that other Latinas in STEM education face (Sayman, 2013). It appears Esperanza views her dissertation research as a means to help future Latina STEM college students in navigating the process more smoothly.

Dalia, on a different note, acknowledged that she wanted to focus her research on the scarcity of Latina leaders in the role of the superintendency. She is an aspiring superintendent who sees this as a future step in her educational career: “As a Latina leader, I want to understand the barriers that are preventing Latinas from reaching this milestone.” Dalia understands that barriers currently exist for Latinas ascending to the top ranks. She concluded, “Once we see our knowledge, experiences and talents as power, we will be able to transform the face of leadership so that Latina representation is present and established in our educational system.” Thus, she intends to use her dissertation research as a springboard for not only herself, but other women like her, who aspire to be superintendents in communities that would benefit from their skills.

Margarita, an aspiring school principal, discussed how unselfish two of her close cohort members have been regarding her own career goals. She referred to Lucia and Dalia (both school principals) as her mentors and described, “Because I want to be a principal, these ladies periodically invite me to their campus to observe or get hands-on experience with some of their responsibilities.” This demonstrates the ways in which both of the principals understood Margarita’s need to be socialized into that area of school leadership. Thus they were acting as mentors and sponsors into the field, helping Margarita to acquire the skills that would be necessary when she was ready to apply for a principalship of her own.

In this discussion of the theme that is reflective of research for the greater good, each of the women discussed the ways in which they believed their dissertation work would impact their communities and society. They are beginning to create a bridge between their “practitioner-selves” and their “scholar-selves” through identity development (Vetter, Fairbanks, & Ariail, 2011) as they progress through their doctoral programs. In a similar way, the following theme that will be discussed shows how the four Latina doctoral students are sharing what they have learned about themselves with others.

Echando pa'lante

Lucia noted a sense of *familia* with her advisor because they are of the same ethnic background: “My mentor is also Latina and I feel like we are part of this sisterhood that promotes the academic and professional success of other Latinas.” As a result of this positive mentoring experience, Lucia has become a mentor to a young woman who works at her campus. She explained,

I have taken her under my wing as a mentee because I see a lot of potential in her. Sometimes she asks me how I am able to work, go to school, and be a mom. I constantly talk to her about the important role she has in starting a new trend of college graduates in her family.

This reflects the work of Espinoza (2010) whose research focused on the various demands of Latinas in college and aspects of resiliency (Morales, 2008). What Lucia, the veteran principal, is doing in reaching out to the young staff member is creating supportive behaviors that may support that woman’s persistence in college and eventually work toward a career.

Doctoral research fellow Esperanza has also taken her positive mentoring experience to heart. She has reconnected with some of her former high school students who are now at the same Hispanic-Serving Institution where Esperanza is working on her doctorate. Her goal is for these young women to “look for me if they ever need help ... maybe because I’ve been helpful in the past and I just feel that it’s important to keep helping those that are going through the tracks that I’ve been through.” Esperanza confirmed that these college-age Latinas had been her students in the past, and she continues to serve as a support system for them. Obviously, Esperanza understands the importance of making connections with others to support persistence in college.

In a similar way, Margarita, a department chair and aspiring principal, pays it forward everyday in her interactions with her students in her physics courses: “I chose to work in a Title I, Latino majority school because those were my demographics growing up. This is where I can make a direct impact.” Through these words Margarita confirmed her desire to help make a difference in the lives of her students. She doesn’t see teaching as simply a career, but as an opportunity to reach out to students who are growing up in similar conditions to the way in which she grew. Perhaps it was a teacher who made a difference in Margarita’s life which has propelled her to serve as a role model and mentor for her own students. This speaks to the

transformative learning process in doctoral education as posited by Stevens-Long, Schapiro, and McClintock (2011). Like Margarita, Dalia reflected on her own experience as she sought to make a difference in her community:

I want my students and community to know that despite the challenges and obstacles that they face every day in *el barrio*, they can be warriors. Even when you face all the faces of fear like poverty, not having your parents in your life and having your elderly grandparents raise you, being an English Language Learner, and being labeled at risk of dropping out of high school, a Latina woman is capable of taking the role of a district administrator. The barriers can be crossed when you are that little brown girl who took all the risks and was determined to be a winner even when everything seemed to point to her failure. Having the experience of my community served as my catalyst for change.

Dalia affirmed the importance that she has given to serving as a role model for her students. As a campus principal she interacts with students and their parents on a daily basis. Through these efforts she has demonstrated that perseverance, dedication, and the support of others contributed to her success.

All of the Latina doctoral students in this study expressed their desires to give back to others. They described the rationale as to why they wanted to help other women and their students out of a sense of sincere caring for the well-being of these persons (Vela, Martinez, & Rodríguez, 2016). The women understood that they did not arrive at their current positions of principal, department chair, and research fellow on their own. This reflective practice of how and where they were raised and their need to reach behind them and help bring others forward stem from a shared Latina consciousness, as described by Delgado Bernal (2001).

Discussion and Conclusion

The *testimonios* of the participants revealed truths and connections to each other in an authentic manner (Pérez Huber, 2009). The women in this study confirmed how the mentoring process through academic support and personal encouragement (Dalia & Castellanos, 2006) served as a key motivator to remain in the doctoral program and persevere. Returning to the Latina/o leadership framework presented earlier in this manuscript, the findings support the three dynamics posited by Bordas (2001, 2013). The first dynamic, *personalismo*, focuses on

individual preparation for leadership. The theme from this study “*Hermanas* aren’t just doing it for themselves” demonstrated the growth of the four *mujeres* through the doctoral program and within their respective leadership positions in schools. The findings clearly document how they enacted culturally relevant leadership in the communities that they served. The second dynamic in the framework by Bordas was *tejiendo lazos*. This dynamic focuses on empowerment to build community. The theme from the findings “*Somos una familia*” showed how the four women engaged in community-building practices with each other, their families, and their peers. These practices enabled them to maintain family ties that grounded their leadership work and application toward their doctoral studies. The third dynamic in the framework is *desarrollando habilidades*. This encompasses the development of Latina/o leaders as community-scholars. The theme in this narrative of “*Echando pa’lante*” demonstrated how the four *mujeres* paid forward the supportive practices that they received and how their goals for the future included the success of the students in the schools where they led and taught.

The value of keeping Latina doctoral students in doctoral programs through program completion will help to fill the thin pipeline of Latina scholars in academia (Reyes & Ríos, 2005). It is important to mentor Latina researchers who will extend the scholarly work that focuses on linguistically and culturally diverse students (Ceja & Rivas, 2010). As a result of the findings of this research, participants can develop socialization strategies for Latina graduate students at their own institutions (Turner, 2002). This community-mentoring experience gave the Latina doctoral students the support and encouragement (Espino, Muñoz, & Marquez Kiyama, 2010) that they needed to thrive. In this manner they will help to increase the number of Latina educational leaders holding doctorates who will grow to be scholars in four-year degree granting institutions, and administrators in schools and districts across the country.

It is important to consider community-mentoring practices in helping to support Latina doctoral students toward degree completion. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2012), only 8,123 Latinas held tenure-track positions in colleges and universities nationwide in 2011. Latinas significantly lag behind White females given that over 150,000 of them held tenure-track positions in 2011. Thus, the need to support Latina doctoral students in educational leadership programs is vital to maintaining a strong stream of candidates for principalships, the superintendency, and academia.

Testimonio from the Author

As the faculty advisor for the four *mujeres* whose voices were shared in this article, I want to take the opportunity to offer my own *testimonio*. I reflect on the work of Barnes and Austin (2009) who remind us of the value of having doctoral advisors reflect on our roles and how such roles directly impact our students. As a Latina educational leader, I take my role of doctoral advisor to heart. I cannot separate my Latina identity from my daily work and interactions with students (Espinoza-Herold & González, 2007). In this way I strive to mentor my students in the same culturally responsive manner in which I want them to serve their own students. For it is from another Latina educational leader, my own mentor and doctoral dissertation advisor that I learned that effective mentoring relationships are about love—the kind of love that stems from the emotional qualities found in mentoring relationships (Goldner & Maysless, 2009) and genuine caring between the mentor and mentees.

It has been my sincere honor to work with the four women in this study. Their sense of service and care for the students that they work with feeds my soul. *Con mi corazón en la mano* I offer these women my sincere gratitude for allowing me to join them on their journey toward the doctorate degree. Through these experiences I was able to learn more about myself as *mujer*, *maestra*, and *mamá*. These women are my academic *hijas*. They come to me with *corazones abiertos* and I return that *amor* through my support of them as friends, scholars, and practitioners. I was honored to have walked alongside them in their journey. *De aquí y pa'lante* they will remain *en mi corazón*.

Recommendations

In this section I would like to share some recommendations for practice. A primary recommendation is related to recruitment efforts and strategies for Latinas into doctoral programs. It is important that faculty members connect with networks that reach Latinas. Outreach efforts must be focused and intentional to recruit women of color into graduate programs of study. Then it is vitally important to support Latina students upon enrollment in doctoral programs. The goal to support them through the dissertation process and toward graduation with the terminal degree must be done by their faculty advisors, dissertation committee members, and other faculty in the program. This leads to the value of training university faculty about the best ways to mentor and support women of color in doctoral

studies. Training should include a panel of Latina graduates and current students who would share which practices worked best for them.

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