

LATINAS ASPIRING TO THE SUPERINTENDENCY:

A PORTRAITURE STUDY

By

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To the faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of IRENE GONZALES find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

Chair

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LATINAS ASPIRING TO THE SUPERINTENDENCY:
A PORTRAITURE STUDY

Abstract

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Women of color, especially Latinas, continue to be underrepresented in the public school superintendency in the United States, and there is little extant research that addresses this issue. This in-depth, qualitative portraiture study explored the lives and experiences of four Latinas who aspire to become superintendents in a northwestern state, addressing these questions: Who are these aspiring Latina superintendents? Why do they aspire to the superintendency? What successes and challenges have they experienced in this quest, and how do they interpret these experiences? And, what meaning do they make of becoming a Latina superintendent? Major findings of this study were that Latina aspirants do experience discrimination in regard to their ability to successfully compete for district superintendent positions. Participants in this study relied on several supports to help them achieve their goals, including: family and work ethic, determination, commitment, mentors, and preparation. The in-depth portraits of these women create new understandings about the struggles of Latinas as they work their way through a system that sometimes offers hope and encouragement, but just as often disempowers them through subtle forms of sexism and racism.

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Dedication

My dissertation is dedicated to the number one most important person in my life, my mommy, Estella Armijo Lugo. She made this possible, because as I slaved away at the keyboard, she took care of my children, fed my family, did the laundry, kept the house organized and cleaned. I also wish to thank my step-dad Gilberto Lugo for assisting mom in all of this work. My girls love their papa!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The literature on Latinas aspiring to the superintendency is thin at best. Most research on Latina superintendents has been carried out by only two researchers, Sylvia Mendez-Morse (1999, 2000, 2004) and Flora Ida Ortiz (1999, 2000, 2001). Taking into consideration the dearth of information on Latinas aspiring to the superintendency, this in-depth, qualitative portraiture study explores the experiences of four Latinas who aspire to become school superintendents in an effort to add to this body of research. Even so, more research is needed that examines the barriers that keep Latinas underrepresented in the superintendency and how individual Latinas work to overcome these barriers.

Background

It is well-understood that the majority of the superintendents currently leading public schools in the United States are white males, and that women and minorities continue to be underrepresented in this role. Many scholars address the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency (Blount, 1998; Brunner, 1999a; Glass, 2000; Glass, Bjork & Brunner, 2000; Grogan, 1996; Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000; Tallerico, 1999). Blount (1998), for example, in her historical study found that women held 9% to 11 % of all superintendencies from 1910-1950. This figure declined dramatically to 3% during the period of 1950 to 1970. From 1970 to 1990, there was a modest increase of female superintendents to 5%. By 2003, Grogan and Brunner (2005b) found through a national survey that the percentage of female superintendents had increased to 18%. Other scholars have taken a more focused view of this issue and are concerned with the lack of minority or women of color in the superintendency (Alston, 1999, 2000; Bell & Chase, 1994; Brunner & Peyton-Claire, 2000; Grogan, 1999; Jackson, 1999;

Marshall, 1994b; Shakeshaft, 1989). And among these scholars, only two have focused extensively on Latina superintendents (Mendez-Morse, 1999, 2000; Ortiz, 1999, 2000, 2001a, 2001b).

In light of the growth of the Latino/Latina population in the United States and in schools, Latinas are underrepresented in the superintendency. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Latinos¹ represented 14.1 % of the United States population in 2004, and this is expected to grow to 25% by 2050. However Glass, Bjork, and Brunner's (2000) research indicated only 1.4% of superintendents nationally were Latino and only 1.3% were Latinas. Given these figures, Glass et al. rightfully note that the percentage of minority superintendents has not kept up with the rise in percentages of minority students, particularly in regard to Latinos.

There is a dearth of research exploring the relative underrepresentation of Latinas in the superintendency (Mendez-Morse, 1999; Ortiz, 1999). While there is some research on minority women in school administration, most of it has focused on African American women (e.g., Alston, 1999, 2000, 2005; Jackson, 1999; Tillman & Cochran, 2000).

This qualitative portraiture study explores the lives of Latinas who aspire to be school superintendents with the goal of adding to this literature. The study was conducted in a northwestern state, which has a growing Latino population. From 1990 to 2000 the Latino population in this state doubled, increasing from approximately 200,000 to over 430,000 persons, growing much faster than any other racial group in the state.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau defines Hispanics or Latinos as those people who classified themselves in one of the specific Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino categories listed on the Census 2000 questionnaire –“Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano,” “Puerto Rican”, or “Cuban” –as well as those who indicate that they are “other Spanish/Hispanic/Latino.” In this research, I use Latino/a and Hispanic as interchangeable terms that mean the same ethnicity.

Problem Statement

The vast majority of superintendents in American school districts are white men. Women and minorities are generally underrepresented in the superintendency, with Latinos acutely underrepresented. However, there is scant research that addresses this issue, particularly in regard to Latinas. As Ortiz stated in 1999, “information on Hispanic women superintendents is, in effect absent from the literature. This lack of research is a serious deficiency” (p. 126). More research is needed in two areas: The barriers that keep Latinas underrepresented in the superintendency, and, conversely, the ways that individual Latinas work to overcome these barriers. The voices of these women need to be heard.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this in-depth, qualitative portraiture study is to explore the lives and experiences of four Latinas who aspire² to become school superintendents in a northwestern state, addressing these questions: (a) Who are these aspiring Latina superintendents? (b) Why do they aspire to the superintendency? (c) What successes and challenges have they experienced in this quest, and how do they interpret these experiences? and (d) What meaning do they make of becoming a Latina superintendent?

Methods

I used the methodology of portraiture for this qualitative study, relying primarily on Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis's (1997) approach. Portraitist researchers seek to accurately represent the life experiences and voices of research participants. In addition, portraiture incorporates the knowledge and experience of the researcher. A key component in the effective use of portraiture is the relationship between the researcher and participants. Lawrence-Lightfoot

² Grogan (1996) describes aspirations to mean the hopes of superintendency as the desired occupational outcome of the academic and experiential preparation that motivates certain administrators in the public school systems.

and Davis describe portraiture as a shared dialogue between the portraitist and the participants. The portraiture methodology will be described more thoroughly in chapter three.

In keeping with portraiture methodology, data were collected through interviews and observations. Study participants included four Latinas aspiring to the superintendency. All of the participants were of Mexican descent, held public school administrative roles, and had completed a superintendent's certification program. The participants also had to self-identify as aspiring to the superintendency to be eligible for the study. At the beginning of the study, two participants were elementary principals, one participant was a central office director, and the other participant was an assistant superintendent. At the conclusion of this study, one participant continued as an elementary principal, two participants had been named assistant superintendents and one participant had become a superintendent.

Extensive in-depth, open-ended interviews were conducted with each participant, allowing for rich narrative details of their life histories and experiences to emerge. The findings are reported as narrative portraits of the four Latina participants.

Report of the Study

This report of the study consists of five chapters. Chapter One introduces the study's focus and methods. Chapter Two examines the literature related to the research problem. Chapter Three discusses the portraiture approach to qualitative research and the methods used for this study. Chapter Four includes in-depth portraits of four Latinas aspiring to the superintendency. Chapter Five presents lessons learned and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To provide a context for the study this selective literature review includes sections on: women in the superintendency, minorities in the superintendency and Latinas in the superintendency.

Women in the Superintendency

The underrepresentation of women in public school superintendencies in the United States is well-documented and extensively discussed in the literature. Glass, Bjork and Brunner (2000) found that nationally only 13.2% of superintendent positions were held by women in the 1999-2000 school years. These researchers point out that women continue to be underrepresented in the superintendency ranks. Similarly, Blount (1998) found that out of more than four million educators in the nation there were fewer than 2,000 women serving in the superintendency. By 2003, Grogan and Brunner (2005b) established through a national survey that the percentage of women in the superintendency had increased to 18%, which was an all-time high. While this slight increase looks promising as a trend, it is clear that women continue to be significantly underrepresented in the superintendency. Hill (2005b), in an interview with C. Cryss Brunner, a well know researcher of women superintendents, cautioned other researchers not to be overly optimistic, noting that early in the 1900s there were approximately 11% women superintendents, and so an increase of only 7% over 100 years is insignificant.

Several researchers have explored the reasons for the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency. Glass (2000) questioned whether discrimination on the part of school boards and those involved in the hiring process plays a part. Based on data from Glass, Bjork and

Brunner's (2000) survey research, Glass speculated on seven reasons why the number of female superintendents lags behind the number of men. These were: (a) women are not in positions that normally lead to the superintendency; (b) women are not gaining superintendent's credentials in preparation programs; (c) women are not as experienced or as interested in district-wide fiscal management as men; (d) women are not interested in the superintendency for personal reasons; (e) school boards are reluctant to hire women superintendents; (f) women enter the field of education for different purposes; and (g) women enter the field of educational administration too late in their careers.

Based on this research, Glass (2000) offered strategies to help attract more women to the superintendent ranks. These strategies included changing the nature of the superintendency. Glass suggested that a cadre of well-trained central-office staff used to support the superintendent could change the intense work load of a superintendency and therefore could attract more women. Another strategy was that school boards should make it possible for women superintendents to excel in what they like to do, which for many females superintendents is work in the areas of curriculum and instruction. In addition, states and higher education institutions should provide incentives to women to encourage them to gain a superintendent's certificate, and another consideration was that districts and search firms should be rewarded by states for hiring women or minorities as superintendents.

Dana and Bourisaw (2006a) and Bourisaw and Dana (2006) referred to women superintendents who are not valued as "discarded leadership." In exploring this issue, Beekley (1999), Dana and Bourisaw (2006b), and Tallerico and Burstyn (1996), studied the exiting of female superintendents from the position. Dana and Bourisaw found that women more often than

men left because there was not a good “fit” with the school board, school board members were not working as a team, and the school board was micromanaging the superintendent’s work.

Tallerico (2000a, 2000b) voiced concern about women’s access to the superintendency and the “hidden rules” of the position, which may be less familiar to women. In addition, Brunner (2000), Skrla (2000), Skrla, Reyes and Scheurich (2000), and Tyack and Hansot (1982) have all discussed the silence of female superintendents. Skrla et al. found that women were hesitant to speak up and acknowledge their differential treatment as women, therefore, they maintained a silence about the profession in which they worked.

Other areas of concern for female superintendents are race and/or gender bias. These have been examined by several researchers (Bell, 1995; Brunner, 1999b, 2000; Chase, 1995; Grogan, 1999; Marshall, 1994a, Marshall, 1994b; Ortiz & Ortiz, 1994; Schmuck, 1999; Shakeshaft, 1999; Skrla, 2000; Tillman & Cochran, 2000). For example, Brunner (2000) conducted a study of 12 female superintendents and found that their stories were full of inequality. It did not matter that the study’s participants were in powerful positions; they still experienced gender bias. All of these researchers have contributed to understanding some of the challenges female superintendents face.

Minorities in the Superintendency

Many researchers voice concern that the gender and racial makeup of public school leadership is not keeping pace with an increasingly diverse student population. For example, Hodgkinson and Montenegro (1999) discovered that in 1985 minorities held 3% of the superintendencies, and then increased to 5% in 1998. Hodgkinson and Montenegro do not see this picture improving as they see little effort at the state and national educational level directed toward the solution of this problem. They project that by 2025, white students will become the

minority in our nation's schools. These demographic changes provide a strong rationale for change and the need to support increased diversity in the superintendency.

Most of the scant research has focused on African American women (Alston, 1999, 2000; Brunner, & Peyton-Caire, 2000; Jackson, 1999; Tillman & Cochran, 2000). For example, Grogan's (1996) research on aspiring women in the superintendency included 23 white women and four African American women, but no Latinas. The research on African American women in the superintendency tends to focus on their experiences in the role and the challenges they face, which sometimes includes racial and gender bias and their underrepresentation in the superintendency. Tillman and Cochran (2000) argue that more research is needed in the areas of racial and gender equity in all aspects of educational administration, including the superintendency. However, Alston (1999) found that the African American women she studied "agreed that racism and sexism were not major obstacles for them" (p. 86). Thus, there is disagreement in the literature about the role of racism in underrepresentation of African American women in the superintendency.

Latinas in the Superintendency

Data regarding Latinas and the superintendency clearly indicate underrepresentation in this role. According to Frank (2005), the total numbers of Hispanic women in the superintendency were disturbing. When she examined California's data, she found that there were only ten female Hispanics out of nearly 1,000 superintendents, and there were 66 Hispanic men serving as superintendents. Using census data from the year 2000, the Seattle Times recently reported that there are 441,509 Latinos living in the state of Washington, representing the largest minority group in the state. This number constitutes approximately 7.5% of the population in Washington State (U.S. Census, 2000). However, out of 296 superintendents in the

state, less than 1.3% (4 total: 3 males and 1 female) were Latinos during the school year of 2005-2006. In Texas, Hill (2005b) reported that Hispanics hold only 7% of the superintendent positions [She did not indicate the female percentage.], which is approximately 80 positions statewide. This number is surprising considering Texas' rapidly growing Hispanic student population is at 45%. Simmons' (2005) data on the race/ethnicity and gender of the superintendents of the Council of the Great City Schools show that, for the years 1997, 1999, 2001, and 2003, Latinos represented 12%, 11%, 9%, and 10% respectively of the superintendents, and Latinas represented only 4%, 4%, 5%, and 0% for the same years. And Grogan and Brunner's (2005a) national study, found that 8% of female superintendents identified themselves as women of color, of which only 1% were Latinas. The researchers found this statistic odd given the comparatively large numbers of Latino students. In their research, Grogan and Brunner (2005a) additionally found evidence suggesting that minority women are more likely to be employed when the school board members are from diverse backgrounds. Further, two of the minority, female participants in the study felt they were unfairly burdened because they continually had to prove their worth after accepting the position. Two participants commented: "A woman of color always has to do a better job. There is little room for error. Her actions are watched and evaluated more closely." Another shared, "The expectations are higher and the tools are not as available as for white counterparts" (§ 21). Frank (2005), interviewed another Latina superintendent who shared the same sentiments, ". . . women of color must work twice as hard to reach their goals in educational management then men do" (§ 19).

The literature on Latinas in the superintendency is scant, and very few scholars do research on this issue. Flora Ida Ortiz (1982), who was the first Latina professor of educational administration in the United States, and Sylvia Mendez-Morse are the two most frequently cited

scholars. Ortiz's 1982 book, which explored socialization processes as they applied to individuals establishing careers in public institutions, is still referenced by many scholars. In subsequent work, Ortiz (1999) found in her study of 12 Hispanic female superintendents that they were matched for particular reasons with school districts. They were more likely to be hired in districts where there is a high Hispanic population, high turnover among staff, financial trouble, a history of difficult relations with the Hispanic community, and difficulty filling the superintendent job. In Ortiz's study, a community leader stated that if there is a Spanish surname on the superintendent interview list, you can bet there are problems in the district. Grogan and Brunner (2005b) similarly found that women of color were twice as likely to be chosen over white women in districts where school reform was needed and where their political skills would be put to a challenge almost immediately. Glass, Bjork and Brunner (2000) encountered similar conditions for minority, female superintendents. They found that minority women are often hired to positions in school districts which lack resources and are marked by significant turmoil. In addition, minority superintendents are often confined to primarily minority student districts. They found "relatively few minority superintendents serving majority districts" (p. 106). These same researchers addressed the fact that minority superintendents believe that discriminatory hiring practices exist and are a major problem for them. This combination of negative factors also contributes to the low number of minority superintendents.

Mendez-Morse's (1999) work studied four Latinas and explored their experiences while becoming superintendents. What was discovered is that these Latinas redefined themselves: "They changed their self-perceptions from persons with the potential to be superintendents to women with assured confidence in their competence to be a superintendent" (p. 127). In another study of six Latinas, Mendez-Morse (2000) found that mentorship and sponsorship would benefit

Latinas, but it is nearly impossible to find Latina mentors. Most likely, Latinas' mentors or sponsors will be white men. This is unfortunate as mentors play an important role in placing Latinas.

Other research has explored various issues related to Latinas in school administration. Quilantan and Ochoa (2004) explored how 11 Latina superintendents from small and rural school districts in Texas interpreted or constructed their personal, social, and professional worlds. They followed these women over a 12 month period. The three characteristics that these women exemplified were professional competence, personal strength, and ability to overcome organizational stressors. The participants spoke of the challenges they encountered while acquiring and retaining the superintendency. The researchers found that these female superintendents indicated that they had to overcome organizational stressors encountered as superintendents—specifically, “sex-role stereotypes, school districts’ profiles, career mobility, isolation, and protection of privacy” (p. 127).

Another challenge Latinas face is ethnic and/or racial or gender stereotyping (Gardiner, Enomoto, & Grogan, 2000; Mendez-Morse 1999; Ortiz, 1982, Quilantan & Ochoa, 2004). Quilantan and Ochoa (2004) found that the Latinas in their study had to overcome biases associated with being a Hispanic female in the superintendency. “They looked different; and they were cognizant of the sex-role stereotypes that existed in their communities” (p. 127). They also report that although the number of Hispanic teachers is growing in public schools [the researchers do not provide data], these teachers are not being mentored into leadership positions. They state, “The number of Hispanic women who achieve senior-level administrative positions, such as the superintendency, is disproportionate to the number of Hispanic women employed in these school systems” (p. 124). Mendez-Morse (2000) also addressed how potential employers’

beliefs in stereotypes such as male domination, the need to maintain the home and raise the children further serve to limit a Latina's options. The author proposes that these negative stereotypes cause potential employers to avoid the possibility of performance issues and, subsequently, to not consider Latinas as serious candidates. In Mendez-Morse's (2000) article, "Claiming Forgotten Leadership" the author contradicts stereotypes of Latina leaders by identifying historical descriptions of women in various roles that have been successful and have not adhered to what some view as a "typical" or expected Latina stereotype. She further states, "Latina superintendents can be considered not as atypical but rather as women who are representatives of leaders who are hidden because of stereotype that is seldom questioned" (p. 595).

Considering that the Latino population is the fastest growing population in our nation, the benefit of having Latina females lead our schools is justifiable. Latinas will serve as role models for all children, especially for Latino children. Latinas have a deep understanding of the nature of Latino families and, as a result, are able to positively influence student success and academic performance. "Role models from all ethnic groups are few and far between. Indeed, research with a focus on minorities in the superintendency is comparatively rare" (Glass, Bjork & Brunner, 2000, p. 103.) I further believe that society as a whole benefits when the number of Latina superintendents is aligned in proportion to the number of Latino students in our schools. This deep belief forms the basis for the study that follows.

It is evident that more research is needed in regard to the underrepresentation of Latinas in the superintendency (Mendez-Morse, 1999). In addition, Mendez-Morse (2000) discussed how researchers rarely include minority women in their research and attributed this to two possible reasons, one of which is that there are so few researchers studying Latinas, and the

reality that there are so few Latinas in the superintendency to study. She views this as “. . . exclusion and neglect and [as negating] the contributions of Latina leaders” (p. 584). Thus, through my study of four aspiring Latina superintendents, I contribute to the research on Latinas that is so desperately needed in education.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this in-depth, qualitative portraiture study is to explore the lives and experiences of four Latinas who aspire to become school superintendents in a northwestern state, addressing these questions: Who are these aspiring Latina superintendents? Why do they aspire to the superintendency? What successes and challenges have they experienced in this quest, and how do they interpret these experiences? And, what meaning do they make of becoming a Latina superintendent? In this chapter, the methodology used to address these questions will be discussed. In particular, the portraiture approach to qualitative research will be explained in some depth.

Portraiture

I used the methodology of portraiture for this qualitative study, relying primarily on Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis's (1997) approach. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis describe portraiture in this manner:

Portraiture is a method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. Portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experiences of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions—their authority, knowledge, and wisdom. (p. xv)

Thus, portraitist researchers seek to accurately represent the life experiences and voices of research participants. In addition, it is important to note that portraiture also incorporates the knowledge and experience of the researcher. A key component in the effective use of portraiture is, therefore, the relationship between the researcher and participants. Thus, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis describe portraiture as a shared dialogue between the portraitist and the participants.

According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), the portraiture approach is comprised of five features: context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and the aesthetic whole. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis describe these five elements as follows:

1. *Context* is the setting; it is used to place people and action in time and space as a resource for understanding the experience. Describing the context allows the reader to connect with the participant's life story and as a result, share her experience. When describing the context, the author focuses first on the description of the physical setting. Often included is the historical context or "the origins and evolutions of the organization and the values that shape its structure and purpose" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 52).
2. The researcher's *voice* is heard throughout the story and frames the inquiry through the questions she asks, in the data she shares, and the stories she tells. Both the voice of the writer and the voice of participant are part of the narrative. "In terms of the construction of the final portrayal, voice as interpretation determines language, frames and selects images, modulates articulation, and balances the separate parts of the portrayal into a cohesive aesthetic whole" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 113).
3. *Relationships* are necessary in successful portraiture and critical for deconstructing the power structures that often exist between the researcher and the participant. Building relationships sets portraiture apart from traditional research, in which the researcher maintains a distance from his "subject." In portraiture, however, the researcher invests great care in establishing trust and rapport with the participant.

4. *Emergent themes* grow out of the processes of data collection and analysis. The themes emerge from the participant's voice, documents, observations, and shared descriptions. These themes are then used to develop and create the portrait.
5. An *aesthetic whole* is the result of the researcher bringing together all of the data components into a coherent framework in order to develop a complete portrait of the participant's life. Four components comprise the aesthetic whole: conception, structure, form, and cohesion. Conception is the overarching story of the portrait, which shapes and provides structure for the narrative. The structure is the strength and stability of the portrait, and is reflected in headers in the paper, supporting the portrait as it is described and built (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 252). Madden, as cited by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, refers to form as a kind of "mysterious phenomenon" that captures "emotion and movement" (p. 254). "For the portraitist, form is the texture of intellect, emotion, and aesthetics that supports, illuminates, and animates the structural elements" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, p. 254). Cohesion is the blending of conception, structure, and form, providing the order and logic to the portrait.

When all of the essential elements of portraiture are combined, a rich narrative emerges that provides the potential for deep understanding of participants' stories and deep connection between the reader and the narrative.

In alignment with portraiture methods, the data for this study were collected through personal interviews, a review of documents, and observations of all four participants. As I "perched" myself in the participants' lives, analysis was continuous during the data-gathering process. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe the importance of the researcher's perch and perspective to the development of the narrative's context:

It is not only important for the portraitist to paint the contours and dimensions of the setting, it is also crucial that she sketch herself into the context. The researcher is the stranger, the newcomer, the interloper—entering the place, engaging the people, disturbing the natural rhythms of the environment—so her presence must be made explicit, not masked or silenced. Noting the perch and perspective of the portraitist, the reader can better interpret the process and the product of her vision. In portraiture, then, the place and stance of the researcher are made visible and audible, written in as part of the story. The portraitist is clear: from where I sit, this is what I see; these are the perspectives responding to my presence. (p. 50)

Thus, it was very important in conducting this portraiture study to identify prejudices and biases from my own life history and to share these insights while telling the participants' stories. In this way, I inform the reader of the filter I used to interpret the data. Therefore, as I present the portraits of the participants in chapter four, I interweave parts of my personal story, revealing how I related to their personal stories.

Some researchers may regard portraiture as an alternative method. In my mind, although it is admittedly a nontraditional method, it is also a valid and effective way to draw a picture of participants by telling their stories in their own words. In this case, the stories are the rich narratives of four Latinas aspiring to the superintendency. There is definitely an artistic quality to the portraiture technique. As I learned more about this research method, thoughts of Wolcott (2005) came to mind. I believed he would have approved of my chosen method as he would have perceived it as a chosen “craft,” an art of self-expression.

Ellis and Bochner (2003) also stress the importance of personal narrative as a legitimate form of research:

The mode of storytelling is akin to the novel or biography and thus fractures the boundaries that normally separate social science from literature; the accessibility and readability of the text repositions the reader as a coparticipant in dialogue . . . the disclosure of hidden details of private life highlights emotional experience and thus challenges . . . stressing the journey over the destination . . . and the episodic portrayal of the ebb and flow of relationship experience dramatizes the motion of connected lives across the curve of time, and thus resists the standard practice of portraying social life and relationships as a snapshot. Evocative stories activate subjectivity and compel

emotional response. They long to be used rather than analyzed; to be told rather than theorized and settled; to offer lessons for further conversation rather than undebatable conclusions; and to substitute the companionship of intimate detail for the loneliness of abstracted facts. (p. 217-218)

Ellis and Bochner's description of personal narratives and telling the story serve to explicate the inherent value found in portraiture.

Methods

Context for the Study

My interest in this study emerged five years ago when I was searching for a Latina superintendent whom I could emulate as a mentor. It was quickly apparent that there were no Latina superintendents in the northwestern state in which I live and work. This lack of Latina superintendents in my home state did not feel right to me, since it did not reflect the growing Latino population in the state. From 1990 to 2000 the state's Latino population doubled, increasing from approximately 200,000 to over 430,000 persons, growing much faster than any other racial group in this state. As a result of this experience, I made it a goal to one day study this issue.

When I had the opportunity to enact this goal, I realized that I first needed to know which school districts in the state were led by women and how many of these women were Latina. What I discovered was that, for school year 2005-2006, there was only one Latina leading a public school district, and she was in her first year. Later, another Latina superintendent was hired for a superintendency in the fall of 2006. Concurrently, there were three Latino men in the superintendency. Using the state education directory from 2005-2006, I found that across the nearly 300 school districts in the state, slightly less than 21% of the superintendents were women. The one Latina superintendent in 2005 thus represented .003% of superintendents in the state.

Participants

During the 2005-2006 academic year, I conducted a pilot portraiture study of four Latinas aspiring to the superintendency. To be chosen for the study, the Latinas had to meet the following criteria: (a) be enrolled in or have completed a superintendent's certification program; (b) be of Mexican descent, either born in the United States or in Mexico; (c) be in an administrative role, whether as a principal or in a central office position; and (d) self-identify as an aspiring superintendent. With these criteria in mind, I sought nominations of potential participants from a university that has a superintendent credentialing program. As a result of my inquiry, I was given five names of potential candidates, and I contacted all five hoping to convince them to be participants in the study. Four of the five agreed to participate. Appendix A provides the characteristics of these four participants, and Appendix B provides information on the school districts where they were employed during the pilot study year. Findings from the pilot study showed that these participants had strong mothers who encouraged them to become educated. They also had at least one teacher who influenced them and believed in them at an early age, and several wanted to show others what they could accomplish. While the stories of these women captivated and inspired me, the pilot study was very limited in that the data collection included only one interview with each participant. It was clear to me that the findings only scratched the surface of the powerful stories these participants had to share. Therefore, with the participants' consent, I expanded the original work to incorporate a more thorough and in-depth study with the original four participants, spending additional time with each of them and conducting additional in-depth interviews during the fall of 2006. Since the pilot study was concluded, three of the participants have changed jobs. One is now a superintendent and two are assistant superintendents. The other participant is an elementary principal. At least one of the

assistant superintendents and the elementary principal intend to apply for superintendent positions again during the 2006-2007 school year recruitment period.

Data Collection

In keeping with portraiture methodology, data were collected through interviews and observations. I spent a minimum of two days with each participant, interviewing each at least twice. Interviews lasted from one to over three hours, with the average being one hour and 45 minutes. Observations and interviews took place at the participants' work sites. In most instances, interviews were conducted in the participant's office. One participant invited me to her home, where a three-hour interview took place. In retrospect, I believe the comfort level of being in her home contributed to this participant's openness and sharing, and I found this interview was the most detailed and descriptive of all the interviews. During onsite visits, I observed the participants in their current work roles, for example in conferences with staff members or leading a school improvement meeting. In addition, I collected artifacts in the form of district documents such as school board minutes, brochures, newsletters, demographic data, assessment data, and district web-site information. These documents were helpful in understanding the district context for each participant.

The interview guide and questioning techniques were adapted from Elliott's (2005) and Seidman's (1998) suggestions for phenomenological interviewing, an approach that I believe is compatible with portraiture methodology. The questions on the interview guide (see Appendix E) were intended to be open-ended, and I probed for further information when clarification or detail was needed. During the interviews, the participants were asked to reflect on their histories, life experiences, and the meaning their history and life experiences brought to their aspirations of becoming superintendents. Each participant shared the successes and challenges of being an

aspiring superintendent. Three participants, each of whom had recently secured new positions, were encouraged to provide descriptive examples of the superintendent interview and selection process, and to reflect on what their newly acquired positions mean to them. Each interview was audio-taped and later transcribed for analysis. I kept a partial audio diary and a partial written diary during the process of the study to record both analytical thoughts and feelings experienced throughout the process. I used three recorders, one digital recorder for the interviews themselves, one tape recorder as back-up, and another tape recorder on which to record my impressions and thoughts as I drove to and away from each site and explored participants' work places. I also kept extensive field notes and analytical memos as I conducted my research which proved helpful during my analysis as I coded and searched for themes.

Analysis

In the case of portraiture, the analysis method “seeks to record and interpret the perspectives and experiences of the people they [researchers] are studying, documenting their voices and their visions—their authority, knowledge, and wisdom” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xv). Once in the field, I followed Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis' recommendation: I listened, observed, and was open to all that was going on in the surroundings, documenting first impressions and what was surprising. At the end of each day of data collection, I gathered all of my notes and audio-tapes and scrutinized and organized the data in an effort to make sense of it. These daily documented impressions helped me interpret what I observed and helped me plan what questions I still needed to ask. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis also recommend sorting, grouping and classifying data in anticipation of the narrative. I did this before and after each interview. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis cite Gilligan's suggestion to scrutinize interview transcriptions four times, each time providing the researcher an opportunity

to listen for a different voice. I did scrutinize all of the transcriptions at least four times looking for themes that appeared in all of the narratives of the participants. This repetition helped me frame the portraits because I was able to pick out similar themes that effectively tell the participants' stories. For that reason, the analysis was ongoing and interwoven in the narratives of the four Latina participants as documented throughout the next chapter. These portraits were based on the interviews with participants, observations, field notes, and selected district documents.

As a part of the writing process, I included parts of my life story as they related to and/or enhanced the participants' narratives. Ellis and Bochner (2003) refer to this method as reflexive ethnography. "It is where the researcher's personal experience becomes important primarily in how it illuminates the culture under study" (p. 211). In this case, the reflective process occurred as I relived and wrote my own story as I reflected in the participants' narratives. Writing in this manner required deep knowledge and analysis of the participants' histories in order to effectively blend all our stories into the completed portraiture. Tedlock, as cited by Ellis and Bochner also refers to this as narrative ethnography. "This is where the ethnographer's experiences are incorporated into the ethnographic description and analysis of others and the emphasis is on the 'ethnographic dialogue or encounter' between the narrator and members of the group being studied" (p. 212). Therefore, the reader will also learn about parts of my life in chapters four and five, as I believe it serves to further illuminate the participants' portraits.

Ethical Considerations

Pragmatically speaking, I realize that even with my efforts to ensure confidentiality for participants, there may be an ethical concern because there are so few Latinas in this northwestern state aspiring to the superintendency. However, I tried to protect the identity of the

participants and their districts by not providing full descriptions of settings and/or by not providing too much personal information about the participants. Pseudonyms were used for participants and their districts throughout the study. Each participant was assured that no harm would come to them from participating, and that they could withdraw at any time. Participant consent forms were signed by each participant (see Appendix D).

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) speak to the ethical dilemmas and moral responsibility of the researcher in conducting a portraiture study. They cite Featherstone's position, which states that portraitists have an ethical responsibility to tell their participants' stories in ways that are accurate and respectful. The authors also raise a concern for how the portraitist must avoid entering people's lives, building relationships, engaging in discourse, and making an imprint, only to leave abruptly. This warning concerns me because I have built a relationship with my participants and believe I will be part of their lives for many years to come. I did not intend to create a close and involved relationship with the participants. However, because of the facts that we all have so much in common and there are so few Latina professionals with similar stories, I realize now that it was inevitable that we would form close connections. The relationships I now have with the participants range from that of an acquaintance with whom I will remain in contact to the close relationship that one might have with a dear sister. In addition to these personal connections, I know that we will continue to follow each other's careers.

As the study unfolded, my ethics were tested at different points in time. On more than one occasion, I interviewed the participants only to learn that at least two of them were competing for the same job. In fact, on one occasion, three out of four had applied for the same position. The participants asked me if I knew who their competition was, and I replied, "Yes,"

but let them know I could not say who the other applicants were. I did not reveal my knowledge of the applicant pool, even when one of the participants proffered one of the other participant's names as a potential candidate.

Credibility

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) cite Maxwell when discussing credibility and validity in a portraiture study:

Maxwell (1996) refers to this standard of credibility, this effort to construct a trustworthy narrative, as "validity." Objectivity is not the standard for validity as it is in quantitative research. . . . Maxwell speaks of it holistically as "the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account. . . . Nor are you required to attain some ultimate truth in order for your study to be useful and believable." (p. 245)

In this study, I attempted to enhance credibility and validity through the collection of rich data and triangulation of data, thus constructing a credible picture of what I learned about each participant. However, it should be noted that English (2000) critiques the credibility of portraiture studies. He states, "There is no external, independent referent for ascertaining the truth-telling capacity of the portraitist because the definition of truth is circular" (p. 21).

Notwithstanding this critique, I believe that the portraits I have constructed are fair, accurate, and respectful, given the data collected.

To further enhance the study's credibility, I sent transcripts of the interviews to each participant to read, so that they might provide feedback to me. I asked them if I captured their stories and to tell me their thoughts as they read the interviews. Only one participant requested that I change a few words; she also asked that I add a couple of sentences to one section.

Otherwise, the participants were satisfied with the transcripts.

CHAPTER 4

PORTRAITS OF FOUR LATINAS ASPIRING TO THE SUPERINTENDENCY

This chapter presents the portraits of four Latinas aspiring to the superintendency. In presenting these portraits, the intent is to allow the authentic voice of each participant to be heard. Thus, the participants' own words, set off in italics, are presented as they were actually spoken by the participant. Participants and their school districts have been given pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of their identities.

The length and descriptive detail included in the respective portraits were influenced by a number of factors. First was the amount of time I was able to spend with each individual. On occasion, the interview schedule was interrupted by busy schedules or unexpected events. In addition, some participants were comfortable sharing a great deal of information, while others were more reserved. It is important to note that an essential element of portraiture is the building of trusting relationships between the interviewer and participant. I believe that my ability to build this type of personal connection with each participant contributed to the richness of the data, although this varied slightly among the participants. Personalities also played a role in the amount and quality of the data gathered. One participant was quite direct and to the point, which resulted in a brief descriptive piece. In contrast, the other three participants were more deeply descriptive and reflective in what they shared, resulting in lengthier portraits.

Each participant's portrait begins with a brief introduction. Following the introduction, I present each Latina's personal history, an overview of her career and profession, and a description of the challenges and successes each encountered during the interview process. I close each portrait with a section entitled "The Rest of the Story," in which I fill in additional

information about the participant's progress, offer advice to fellow aspirants, and conclude each individual's story.

Mary Ramirez: "I Just Want to Do Good for Others and Contribute to Something Bigger"

Introduction

When I first met Mary, she was a principal in Parkview School District. Mary is 36 years old and seems to be a very happy person who greets everyone with a smile on her face. The youngest of the four participants, she was noticed for her leadership potential as a young elementary teacher and she was hired without an interview for her first administrative position as an assistant elementary school principal. At the time of our first interview, Mary had been a principal for three years and stated that she was ready for a superintendency. Since the district where she served as principal is not large, Mary had been given additional responsibilities which allowed her to demonstrate her leadership abilities. For example, Mary was considered the "central registration" person for the district. When new students enrolled in the district, Mary was the person who placed them. She took into consideration any special needs or requests, and the individual building enrollment and class sizes. Mary's school district is located in a small city of approximately 4,000 people, in which the majority of the student population is Hispanic.

When I returned for Mary's second and third interviews during the second year of data collection, she had been named an assistant superintendent in the Kellogg School District, a transition I will discuss later.

Personal History: "I knew from that time on that things were going to be different"

On my way to spend the day with Mary while she was principal of an elementary school in Parkview School District, I lost my way and so got a quick tour of the small town as I was searching for the school. I saw agricultural fields surrounding the town, which had many small,

older homes. The majority of the people who live in this community are migrant farm laborer families, and their homes are quite modest. As I drove, I knew I was getting close to the school, because there were so many young children, who appeared to be Hispanic, walking toward what I hoped was the school. As I pulled into the gravel parking lot, I smiled, thinking back to my own thirteen years as an elementary principal and how I still miss managing my own school. It was the 500 hugs that I would get every time I walked onto the playground that I really enjoyed and deeply miss.

On this particular February morning there was a chill in the air, and the empty bike rack confirmed that it was not yet spring. As I approached the school building, the first thing I noticed was a welcome sign written in two languages:

Visitors always welcome.
Please check into the office so we
may assist you. Thank you.

Visitantes siempre
son bienvenidos.
Favor de
presentarse en la
oficina para ayudarlo.
Gracias.

As I entered the school, I observed pictures of students on the “Student of the Month” bulletin board on my left. Right above the hallway entrance to the classrooms, another sign said, “Bienvenidos A Los Pasillos De Aprendizaje” in Spanish, and in English, “Welcome to the Halls of Learning!” I immediately felt a warm and inviting feeling about this school. This school reminded me of the last school where I served as principal and how we also published everything in Spanish and English to make students, families and visitors feel welcomed.

As I entered the office area, I was greeted by two secretaries who immediately offered me coffee and let Mary know I had arrived. I entered Mary’s office while she was in the middle of a discussion with a parent over a student discipline issue. I was introduced to the parent and Mary asked if it was okay that I observe their interaction. The parent agreed. The issue was serious as

the child had brought a knife to school. Mary was very supportive of the parent and made it clear she wanted the child at school; but that she needed the parent's help to work on the child's behavior.

As I looked around Mary's office, I noticed a picture of what looked like a one-room house. Later Mary shared with me that the photo was of her home in Mexico and that there *actually were two rooms in our home. We only had about 210 square feet total. One room was 10 feet by 13 feet, and the other 8 feet by 10 feet.* She shared that *those were happy times with her three siblings and mom and dad,* despite not having a bathroom or shower. *We just moved in, even though the floors were made out of dirt.* She commented that later her mom made sure the floors were cemented. I did not know whether it was appropriate to laugh or not when she shared that the restroom was a *cave some distance away.* I could not help but be shocked and laughed as almost a nervous response. At the same time, I quickly realized that this was her reality and provided a glimpse into Mary's early life in Mexico with her family. Mary continued speaking of her loving family. *Even when my family had nothing; there was always lots of love in our home.*

Mary came to the United States with her family when she was in first grade. She worked in the fields from the time she was seven years old through her high school years. She felt lucky that her family listened to her when she was in high school when she requested that she not have to work in the fields so that she might focus on her studies and eventually go to college. She remembered telling her parents that *I needed to stay in school so that I could maintain my grades as I was thinking of college, but I did continue to work in the summer months.* Mary's mom had some regrets about her own life, *not having the same opportunities as us, she doesn't think she accomplished enough, nor did enough.* I sensed that Mary's mother wanted more for her children, and that is why she supported them going to school. This story also reminded me of my

own upbringing and how I finally got out of going out to work in the fields. Unfortunately, it was not to study because I still needed to work to contribute to the household income. However, my mother also wanted something better for me, and she viewed washing dishes as better than field work. I enjoyed washing dishes at the nursing home, as it wasn't as laborious as field work and I did not have the hot sun on my back.

Mary's dad told her that he never went to school, and that he could not read and write. However, Mary thinks he attended school until third grade, and she swears she has seen him read novellas (short Spanish soap opera-type books). When Mary speaks of her parents she tells of how her dad had a very hard life:

He's quite the character. He was born in what he calls "The Sierra" in the mountains up in Mexico on a tiny little ranch. They had no amenities whatsoever. He was shoeless most of the time, barely had clothes. They would go and work, but they were really working for not much because they never really got paid. I think they worked to feed themselves more than anything, and every time he talks about it, he hates it. He hates remembering that time of his life, because he said it was horrible and he would never go back there ever again. It was just too hard. But he is a really smart man because he got himself out of there.

An area that Mary began to question as she grew up in a traditional Mexican home was the dominant role of the man of the family. She was taught that *the man rules the world . . . I think me more than my sisters grew up thinking that men were the smart ones. I thought that they were supposed to take care of everything.* But it really bothered her when she observed over and over again *my dad would not take care of things.* She described two examples: *When we hit on harsh times, I would think, "Okay, why aren't you providing for us?" or when we had trouble with the immigration system and needed help with our papers, "Why couldn't he get them fixed?"* From Mary's discussion I learned that the Mexican macho male image annoyed her because she became *disillusioned* by the presumption that *men are it, that men are all that. We are raised thinking that the man is going to take care of us.* Instead she found herself helping her

dad all the time and even having to help the neighborhood men and relatives with filling out papers. She credited her mom's independence and strong will as the model that demonstrated that women can do what a man can do. Her mom helped her realize that *I do need to take care of things myself.*

Mary's face lit up as she described how smart and independent her mother is. She portrayed her mother in this way:

Like I said, my mom's really, really smart. She's like so independent, very strong willed. When we first came to the states, my dad didn't want her to work because she was a woman. You know, women don't work; the men are the ones that work. And she said, "If you let me go work with you, we'll make more money. And you know we need the money; we have to pay the lawyers." We did have lawyers that were trying to work on our case to help us get our immigration status and papers. My dad finally let her go one time, and that's all it took, just one time for her to go work with him for him to continue taking her because she was the one that was making the money. She was that fast. In those days, there was more work paid by the piece as opposed to by the hour, so my mom was like, she was on fire; she just worked so hard and so fast that she would just pass my dad up like nothing. It hurt his ego, but he liked the money, so he let her keep going.

Mary has five siblings, three brothers and two sisters, and *the majority of them have gone to college and experienced some success.* They are a close family and enjoy each other's company. Both of her sisters married Mexican men who *are pretty set in their ways, and sometimes my sisters have struggled with this.* This did make me wonder how Mary's husband, also from Mexico, dealt with her success, and I was curious if he had been supportive. She tells me he was, *but he is from Mexico and he has struggled learning English and going to school . . . but both of us aspired for more.* Her husband was proud of her when she first received an administrative position with its higher level of pay, but it was difficult for him. He did not feel as worthy as he perceived Mary to be; in fact, he *began to feel inferior.* Now at least, *he is working on completing his bachelor's degree [in physics] and this has helped him feel more confident.* Mary pointed out that *he used to not want to attend any dinners or events with me because he*

was not educated enough, but now he says, “What do they know about thermo-dynamics or physics?”

Mary shared a defining moment in school when a teacher complimented her parents about teaching their daughter a good work ethic. Mary tried to feel proud, but it was difficult because she knew she was different from other kids, her family was poor, and here she was a *Mexican out there working*. Her self-esteem was further threatened when a boy said, “Yes, she’s been out there doing that wetback work!” That comment still bothers her today, *but I knew from that time on that things were going to be different*. Mary had no idea how much her life would eventually change. *At the time, I did not know how my future would be different, but my mom and dad had to work that way and I knew I didn’t*. This reminded me of some of my defining moments that made me more determined to show others that I would be somebody someday. One of those moments was in high school when I asked a counselor for assistance with completing college admission applications. He laughed at me and said, “Irene, keep your job washing dishes at the nursing home. You are not college material; see here, you scored only 2% college bound on your SAT.”

She described how others always saw potential in her, *especially a special teacher who believed in her from the first moment they met and who always encouraged her to achieve more and to reach for her dreams*. Mary remembered this special teacher:

Mrs. M. was my fifth grade teacher. I mean, I had great teachers in the beginning. They saw something in me. But I never really took it to heart, to the point where, “Oh, I’m going to be someone.” My fifth grade teacher, though, there was something about the way she acted around me, about me, that made me believe a little bit more about myself. When a teacher recognizes you, without you even expecting it; you know you’re going about your day and before you know it, she’s just singing your praises like there’s no tomorrow. She’s the one that helped me get into the challenge program, the gifted program, and fought tooth and nail to get me in. Because it’s like, “Come on, I don’t want that many people to know anything about me, you know, because it’s just too much.” But, I never forgot it, and it really instilled in me something that made me want to

just keep doing well. So, I was lucky enough as I went on to the sixth grade that her impact stayed with me all the way through high school. She's the one that I went back to tell that I was thinking about going to college and asked what she thought about it. She's the one I always went to, even though I had all these other teachers inspiring me or pushing me. I think she's the one that made me believe in myself.

This same teacher confided in Mary that she should have been in the challenge program (gifted education) in second grade when she was first referred to it. She continued to be referred to the program every year after second grade; however, Mr. E., the teacher for the challenge program, did not want her because she was Mexican! *Can you believe it, just like that Mrs. M. told me. I was surprised that it didn't hurt me, but I think it was because I had her there, and she made sure I got into the program after all.*

As I listened to Mary's story I was grateful to her fifth grade teacher for supporting and encouraging Mary throughout the years. It was evident that Mrs. M. remains an important part of Mary's life. This brought back thoughts of my second grade teacher with whom I keep in contact on a regular basis, as she has always watched over me. In fact, a few years ago when I was named a graduate of distinction, by the district where I attended high school, I had the opportunity to invite a teacher who had made a difference in my life. I asked Mrs. C. to attend with me and be honored for being a positive role model and mentor in my life.

Career and Profession: "They believed in me absolutely; no doubt whatsoever about my potential"

Mary attended college for a couple of years after graduating from high school, but then decided to go to work as a secretary before returning to college to become a teacher. She told me that she had inquired about me when I first became a principal at the age of 27. I had visited the school where Mary was working as a secretary. Mary wanted to know who that young Mexican girl was, and was shocked to hear I was a principal. *I knew then if you could do it that I could do it also.*

She recalled an interesting turn of fate that occurred when she received her first administrative position as summer school director. Mary had become the *boss of this special teacher*, Mrs. M. In spite of their role reversal, Mrs. M. continued to support her and gave her advice. *To have her tell me that she would love for me to be her boss, and not have any ego about this young buck wanting to manage her life in her work place, was just amazing to me.* She laughed as she remembered the first day of summer school, when Mrs. M. came up to her and said, *“Okay, what do you want me to do? What is the plan? Just tell me and tell me exactly how you want us to do it.”* When Mary later interviewed for superintendent positions, Mrs. M. continued to be her cheerleader.

Mary taught elementary school for three years and loved it, but yearned to have a bigger influence on the lives of students. *I thought, I can influence the lives of 28 as a teacher or influence the lives of 400 students as a principal.* She reminded me so much of myself when I made the decision to go into administration at an early point in my career. Mary completed a principal certification program through a university and her administrative internship at the school where she taught. But also in the back of her mind she thought, *“Well, I also want to get my doctorate.”* *And when I spoke to someone at the university, the professor planted the seed of also pursuing the superintendent’s credential.*

She felt blessed that not only had her teachers recognized her abilities, but so did other administrators. In fact, one day when she was in shorts and flip flops, working as the director of summer school, the superintendent for the district asked her if she was interested in becoming an assistant principal. *Just like that I got the job.* Perhaps the most shocking part was when she learned that her salary would double. *I got in my car and cried and went to tell my parents.* She recalled that day:

My mom was so happy for me and everything, and my dad just walked away. He went over to the shed or something because we have a shed back there, and I was just crying, saying, "Why did he leave, why did he leave? He needs to get back over here, I've got to tell you more, and I have to tell you how it all happened." And he came back. He had gone back to the shed to cry because he was so happy! I thought, "Oh my God." So I mean it was like very special. I think about that and I'll never forget that ever, to have my dad tell me that he was proud of me. Here I was thinking he just wanted to go on with his normal day as usual, but no, he went back there because he was just excited and didn't want to share his emotions that outright with us. So then that was my day. It was great. I'll never forget it.

After three years as an assistant principal, Mary was given the opportunity of serving as an elementary school principal in the same district, where approximately 65% of the students are Latinos.

When Mary spoke about what she appreciates in her job, it is the small things, *like when a child wants to see me, or calls and leaves me a voice mail reminding me to call his grandma and invite her to school.* What Mary does not say is how unusual it is that a young child would feel comfortable calling his principal. She clearly has developed a close relationship with her young students.

Mary views her leadership style as a *facilitator, as one who helps develop a plan to improve student learning.* She also believes in *holding people accountable and monitoring her teachers' and students' progress carefully.* She admits to being a *task master* and having a *type A personality, but I have grown a lot, and I've learned to listen to people, and view things from their perspective, and validate what they are doing.* When she reflects on what it means to be a Latina leader in the community, she is aware of the importance she plays as a role model to others. She looks at it this way:

I think as a Latina, I feel good about it and I think the little girls look up to me, and we talk the clothes things and talk about college, and they come in and just sit and chat and they're really honest. I know all of my kids' names. That makes a big difference, and I know little things about a lot of kids. I think that helps. I think kids go home and they feel good about where they are in school and about their principal.

In the community, she feels appreciated by what people tell her. *They share that it is nice to have someone in the ranks that looks like them. And that they know I am out for the good of the kids, and that I am a fair person.*

I suggest that others have noticed her potential and work ethic. She offers that the past superintendent and the past assistant superintendent, both of whom have since retired, *say good things about me, like they have never seen anyone with that kind of work ethic . . . just really good things that you see in a person who does a good job.* She told me that she does work hard, *but it is difficult to view myself that way.* She appreciates how these two superintendents still inspire her, *and when I share with them what I am planning, they tell me, “Go for it.” “That’s great,” and “You can do it!” They make me not doubt myself. They believed in me absolutely, no doubt whatsoever about my potential.*

As we discussed her road to the superintendency, she shared both happy times and disappointing times. For example, her current superintendent, a Caucasian male, has not been supportive. *He tells me that I do not have enough experience to be a superintendent, and when I asked him for letters of recommendation, he blew me off. Every time I called to make an appointment to discuss this with him, he said he was “too busy.”* In fact, the superintendent was unprofessional and told Mary rudely, *“I don’t want other superintendents pissed at me for recommending you.”* He finally agreed to write letters for her, but he wanted the letters to be *confidential* and asked her to provide self-addressed, stamped envelopes so that he could mail the letters himself. When she asked him if *he thought I would be a good superintendent he said, “No!”* Well, I told him, *“I believe I can be an excellent superintendent, and I am well-prepared for the job.”* On a happier note, Mary felt considerable support from her university professors and search consultants. Mary also mentioned that *everyone else is behind me 100%.*

As she considered her life history, career, and the meaning she brings to it all, she reflected about being *ready for the next challenge and ready to do the “dance.”* Mary completed her superintendent’s program, received her superintendent’s credential, and is currently working on her Ed.D. in Educational Administration. She shared:

I do believe that my interaction with other professionals in the state, through coursework and seminars, has been extremely beneficial. They have helped me become more knowledgeable about how things work in terms of the district perspective and not just the building. But I don’t think I would be able to understand that as well, had I not gone through the superintendent’s program. I’m involved enough in the community to get a good feel for what people are thinking and how important it is to the community that they see you around. Then with all of my years here, I do feel prepared. I do think that I’m knowledgeable in the political process. It was hard to digest initially when I first learned of all the politics, but I think it’s a dance that I’m ready to dance. I think it’s something that I can take on and do well, because if I’m growing, I have to take that next step. I do believe that I’ve reached it knowledge-wise and, personally, I think I’ve reached the peak as a principal, other than staying on longer to see more student growth and learning and to see if instructionally if we have made an impact. As a superintendent, I’ll be able to shake hands and talk to people, let them get to know me and find out what they dream for their kids. I mean, I think it’s going to be really hard and difficult and challenging and stressful, and all of those things that come with even being a principal, just at higher levels. I guess I just want the chance. I want the chance to see what I can do, how far I can impact someone or a group or community.

I asked Mary if there are any obstacles she thinks she needs to overcome to get a superintendency job. She explained, *Of course there is my superintendent that is not supporting my application to other districts* and this weighs heavily on her. She also noted:

I have to make sure I know my stuff well, and it really surprises me that I have to go through this. It’s huge for me. And he’s made little comments like, “If you look at all the other central office people, whether superintendents or not, they’re a lot older than you; they’ve been in education for 20 years, you know, 17, 20, 25, even 30 years. They’re not going to want to have someone like you come in who has what, four or five years in administration and just a few years teaching.” That’s a challenge for me in terms of not letting it affect me psychologically. I do not care if those people wanted to do teaching or whatever they did for 25 years before they became a director. There’s nothing in this world that says I have to follow the same path. There’s no law that says I have to, unless the application specifically says: must have five years of teaching; must have ten years of administrative work in a school building; and must have three years work as a curriculum director before they even get considered. If it does not say that, then I’m going to submit the application. I mean that’s how I see it. There’s no reason why I

should have to follow everybody else's path. I don't want to be canned into one of those. That's fine, if people want to do that, that's great. But, if I want to try for this, the worse that could happen is for them to say, "No," and I would stay, and it will work out perfectly for him. You know, it's weird, and it is almost a compliment that he doesn't want to get rid of me. And I never really thought that I really truly wanted to go into the superintendency until I was treated by him this way. He's actually inspired me to go for it, because I really wasn't thinking that I wanted to, necessarily, because of the politics. Maybe I can change things, maybe I can help, or maybe I can prove to others that being a good, true human being to others and wanting the best for people, and having a good heart and noble intentions can achieve something. I don't know, maybe I'm idealistic, but anyway, I guess that would be the major one.

Mary acknowledged that *lately I've noticed how all the people that are introducing themselves at conferences and meetings as superintendents are all white, older men, mostly in their 50's and 60's, and I don't like it.* Mary remembered the support the university advisor in her superintendent program had provided, as well as that of other faculty members who consistently encouraged her throughout the program. Their encouragement made up for the lack of support Mary received from her superintendent, and as a result, she decided to apply for superintendent positions. *To have people like that have faith in you and your abilities caused me to think more seriously about applying.*

Our second and third interview took place after Mary had landed the position as an assistant superintendent in Kellogg School District, which demographically is quite different from the district where she had previously worked. Mary was still bothered by her past superintendent's lack of support. She described this lack of support as a key moment in deciding to pursue other opportunities. *I'm just going to go for it and learn from what he has or hasn't done so that I can be a better person and a better administrator for other people.* She had also started to question if perhaps he was upset by the fact that she was in the process of completing a doctorate, because he made comments like, *"You do not have to have a doctorate to be a superintendent."*

Challenges and Successes of the Superintendent Interview Process: “You are just so tiny and young.”

I was directly involved in observing two of the participants go through an actual interview process (Mary Ramirez and Norma Garcia), and there may be some overlap in their stories since both were involved in Meadow School District’s superintendent interview process. All of the participants had opportunities to prepare, apply and interview for superintendent positions and their interviewing experiences are validated in their portraits through the stories they tell. Of all of the participants, I interviewed Mary most often, and therefore had more to share about her process than the others. She applied to seven districts and was offered four interviews for superintendent positions, and one interview for an assistant superintendent position. Her experiences are described below:

Meadow School District

I had the opportunity to observe “real” interviews for the superintendent position at Meadow School District through my connections with a superintendent’s search consultant. As I drove to this very small rural town I kept wondering, “Could I live here?” It appeared too small a town for my taste, but I was pleased when both Mary and Norma expressed their comfort with the small size of the town. There was not much to the town: a bank, a convenience store, a couple of Mexican restaurants, a grocery store, and a run-down hotel that looked like it had been converted to residential living. Before I reached the high school, where the interviews were to take place, I passed two large, well-kept brick buildings that were the elementary and middle schools for the district. Then as I pulled into the parking lot at the high school, and once again saw a nice looking building, I felt better about the community because it was apparent that the community was proud of its schools. I soon learned that the schools are the focus of all community events.

I arrived early for the interviews and observed families coming and going from the building, as there was a basketball game going on in the gym and other activities in the main building. I got out of my car and spoke to several high school students. They reinforced my thinking that the schools are the hub of the community. They told me that if they didn't have activities at the schools they would be bored to death. They did not seem to mind the close knit community, although they laughed when they told me that everyone is related to everyone else. This district houses approximately 1,300 students, of whom almost 80% are Latino. Many different crops are grown in the area and this small town attracts Latinos to work in the adjacent farmlands.

As I made my way to the high school library, the site for the interviews, I was quickly met by the superintendent's search consultant, who introduced me to the school board members and explained that I was studying females aspiring to be superintendents and would be using the interview process as part of my study. The Board responded to this explanation with positive comments and interest. I noticed immediately that one of the board members was Latina, and she had several questions for me. After she heard that I supervise twelve schools and had superintendent credentials, she asked why was I not applying. She went on to say, "If we do not find someone in this round, we will be calling you. We only had 15 applicants and we were hoping for 30." (I did let her know that I was not interested in applying at that time.)

The high school library where the interviews were to take place appeared quite small to me, even in comparison to the elementary school libraries with which I am familiar. But I soon learned there are approximately 300 students that access the library; therefore, the size and available resources were more than adequate to meet their needs. The setting was a welcoming one with an array of food on a back table, including lunchmeats, breads, cookies, and water. A

continual stream of individuals kept arriving, and, as I was introduced to people, I realized they would all be part of the interview process.

In addition to the five school board members, there were 16 other people representing the administrative team (all male principals), teachers, classified staff, and community members who participated in the interview process, primarily by providing input to the school board on the suitability of the candidate. Each candidate who walked into the library appeared a bit surprised to see such a large group of people. Also, the set-up was a bit awkward, since once the candidates sat down they were facing the school board members, which put the remainder of the audience on the interviewee's right side. This meant the candidates rarely looked at the audience. In retrospect, this setup was intentional; privileging the school board members over the others on the committee, since the board ultimately hires the superintendent. The other participants just provide their recommendations to the Board.

Two of the five candidates being interviewed were participants in this study. Of the five individuals interviewed, three were white males and two Latinas. One individual was a superintendent from a small district of approximately 300 students and one was an assistant superintendent in a district of approximately 3000 students. The other three candidates were principals, one at a high school and the other two at elementary schools. I was able to witness first-hand the interview process, starting with the Board's initial review of the candidates' resumes and interview questions, followed by the Board's greeting of the candidates as they arrived for the interview. After the greetings were concluded, candidates were shown to a separate room where they were given the questions to review in advance. As an observer, I was able to listen to the comments made about each candidate immediately after the interview ended

and before the next candidate was escorted in. During this dialogue about the candidates, the group charted each candidate's strengths and potential areas of concern.

I found the whole procedure rather fascinating, especially the opportunity to observe the two Latina participants in my study go through this process. I found myself feeling very nervous for them, and it was difficult to listen to some of the comments that were made about them after they left the room. For example, after Mary left, one board member said, "She is too young to be our superintendent, not experienced enough." This made me wonder why they had chosen her for the interview in the first place if age and experience were big factors. When she was later chosen as one of three finalists for a second round of interviews, I assumed this board member must have changed his mind.

When Mary found out that she was a finalist, along with Norma Garcia, another Latina, and a white male, she was excited and somewhat surprised because Mary did not feel she had answered the interview questions well. In addition, she mentioned that she did not remember the school board smiling at her throughout the interview process. Mary did recall that the superintendent consultant had warned her, "*You might want to smile more.*" Clearly, there was a lack of rapport on both sides, but now they all would get another opportunity to check out the "fit."

The second interview involved a nine-hour day in which Mary met with two central office staff, principals, the current superintendent, school board members and the community. When Mary arrived for the interview, she was invited to lunch with the superintendent whom she described as *a tall white man who had been the superintendent for over 15 years. I was surprised that he did not know anything about instruction.* He told her, "*I'm ready to retire; things are getting too complex for me.*" When Mary asked him to comment on the type of instructional

leadership that he had established in the district, he responded by saying, *“You know I really do not get into that.”* After lunch, a Latina school board member who owns a trucking business took Mary to tour the school facilities. She felt very comfortable with this board member and commented, *I hit it off with her and she knew some of the same people from my home town, so there was a connection there.* Mary observed that *the buildings are nice, and are well taken care of.* She also had an opportunity to see the students in their home environment, which she said was enjoyable for her. However, this pleasant social interaction stood in contrast to other interactions with the Board. Mary shared with me that she did not appreciate some of the comments and questions that were proffered by school board members at her second interview, such as: *“You are just so tiny and young.”* (Indeed, Mary is only 4’ 11” tall.) And, *“How do you feel about being the boss to men?”* Mary was surprised by these questions, and she answered the first by stating, *I’ve never thought about my size or age in relationship to the job, and that it has not been a problem for me yet. Secondly, I work with men on a daily basis now, and I am quite successful.* As she reflected on this part of the day, Mary said, *I guess in a way I began to see the mentality of what people are used to, the status quo, which is a man, older than 50, white* (long pause) *that is what they are used to.* Later Mary was asked by one of the male board members, *“How will you work with the Hispanic community, and will you be fair and not be biased?”* She assured them she would not have difficulty being fair. This conversation caused, Mary to reconsider some of the statements that had been made about the local Hispanic population during the interview. She wondered why the board members continued to point out differences instead of similarities between members of the community. Mary felt that a more productive approach to the Board’s concerns would be to focus on what they want for all the district’s children, as well as considering how they might help the parents feel more a part of the school community.

Maybe, it is because they view the Mexicans as just toiling in their fields or owning the little stores. How about viewing them as human beings who laugh and cry just like they do? This was very frustrating to me.

Mary felt confident during the community forum when she was able to use her bilingual skills to talk with the families in the audience with limited English skills. It was important for Mary to let the community know she could communicate in both languages. This was a clever strategy, since the job posting listed bilingual language skills as a qualification, but not a requirement. There were over 50 people in attendance for the forum, including an adult ESL class. After the forum, Mary was informed that not many people showed up for the white male finalist's community meeting. She speculated that the word had spread to the Mexican community that there was a Latina candidate who could communicate with them, perhaps explaining why there were so many community participants at her session. She recalled the meeting: *If the question was asked in Spanish, then I answered it in Spanish, and then translated it into English and vice versa.* At the end of the forum, Mary had parents come up to her and they said, "Wow, it is so good to see you here; we never thought they would have someone who looked like you go for this." One of the Hispanic men did mention her youth, but was appreciative that she spoke their language and connected with them. Mary left the forum feeling as though she had performed well and had earned the community's support. She thought that she would be a good match for the position. *If only they could get past my youth, my size, my "Hispanicness," and allow me to be a good fit, I could be. You see, there is a difference between being a good fit and being allowed to be.*

It is ironic, therefore, that Mary did not get the job in Meadow School District, although another Latina, Norma Garcia, was offered the position. Mary was happy for Norma, and

recognized that Norma is a good person, is from the general geographical area, and is someone who will be able to identify and connect with the community because she comes from a similar background. Mary also noted that *Norma is older and more experienced.*

Wall School District

Mary thought that the Wall School District's application process was rather simple. She completed the process as she did for each application, and used the job posting to *address the challenges and strengths of the district and how I aligned with what the district was looking for in their new superintendent.* It was important to Mary to confirm the fact that her comments in the letters were *truly things I believed in and that I would follow through with if hired.* She was thrilled when she received a call telling her that she was one of three finalists even before the first interview had occurred. This initial confidence, however, quickly changed to, *"Oh my God, what am I going to wear?"* Once Mary resolved this question, she refocused on getting ready for a long day of interviews. *I prepared again by rereading the brochure and reread everything I wrote and mentally prepared myself to answer their questions.* Mary spent countless hours with her current business manager to make sure she knew the district's fiscal material well, even preparing some questions for the Board. She was a little disappointed that her husband was not able to accompany her *as he had to stay behind and study. I did call my mom, though, on the way and she, of course, told me to do my best.* Mary's anxious feelings were relieved quickly when she arrived and found that *they were so welcoming! It was really nice and it felt really good.* Mary's day began by meeting with the board of directors. The group outlined the agenda for the day which consisted of meetings with several different groups, including transportation staff, cooks, administrators and teachers. *I was ready and they received me well; I kept thinking to myself, "Okay, I can do this."* Most of the questions the group members asked were not

unexpected. *The transportation folks wanted to know how I was going to get to know them, and they were pretty impressed when I told them I planned to ride their bus routes so that I would know where the students lived.* They responded with some surprise, *“Wow, we’ve never heard of that before.”* None of the groups used scripted questions for this set of meetings, and the informal atmosphere helped Mary feel more comfortable. The kitchen staff wanted to know *if I talk to people that work in those areas. I told them, “Of course I do, and I currently visit my kitchen staff every morning.” They seemed to feel really good about that.*

The formal board interview followed the small group sessions, and Mary did not find their questions difficult at all. At the end of the formal interview, Mary felt that she had answered all of the questions well. *They asked me about 10-15 questions, such as “How would you handle this type of situation?” “Why do you want to work here?” “Tell us about yourself and your background?” “What is your fiscal experience?”* Mary also was not surprised when she was asked a question about the Hispanic population because her homework had revealed that the Latino student population in the district was almost 75% of the total population. But the way the question was posed seemed a little odd to Mary. *“With our large Hispanic population, how will you make sure that people do not perceive you as favoring one group over the other?”* Mary handled the question well and answered it in this manner:

You know it doesn’t even cross my mind. I just work with all people and I feel really good about being able to communicate with the two different communities. I think this will help facilitate my relationship with both, and everyone will know I am not playing favorites. Everyone will know they are being heard and understood since I can communicate in both languages, English and Spanish.

Mary did ask the Board several questions at the end of the interview. *I asked them about their end fund balance and who monitored it? I also asked about any issues they were currently dealing with.* Following the formal interview, Mary then interviewed with central office staff

who asked similar types of questions to those the Board had asked. It was while at lunch with the school board members that Mary was asked a series of very personal questions such as *if I was going to have any children, and when I said, "No," I was asked, "Well do you plan on having any?"* Also during lunch, the building principals asked her questions about how she was going to support them in the leadership of their respective schools. Mary responded by telling them she would want to get to know them, find out what their needs were, and learn more about their instructional programs. *I also wanted them to know I was aware of the challenges they were now facing.* The teachers' questions focused on what kind of a leader she was, and if she included classified staff in making decisions. Mary told them, *I am into shared and distributive leadership.* After lunch Mary met with the current superintendent, and she felt the 45 minute meeting went very well. *He was so positive and said that there were great people here, and that he was going to stay in the community and would be a resource for me. That was nice!*

Perhaps the best part of the day was when a group of high school students were given an opportunity to interview Mary. *They were more nervous than I was, but they had good questions. I then asked them, "So what's the buzz around here?" They all smiled!* She also asked them to tell her what makes them happy and what makes them worried. They were more than happy to communicate their thoughts to her.

When it was time for dinner, not only did the school board members attend, but the administrators of the district as well. *It was so relaxed and fun! People had the best sense of humor. They were just cracking up about stuff and I felt like I was a part of them, even though I was being interviewed.* Mary appreciated the opportunity to see the positive relationship of the school board members and the administrators of the district, especially since this was not a relationship she enjoyed in her own district.

In spite of the generally good feeling that Mary had about the district, she did experience some concern when the board president made comments on the drive back to the public forum. At one point the president mentioned, “You know there are a lot of LDS people here, a lot of Mormons.” *I guess she was just trying to give me more information about the community, but then she said, “You know, you’re small, but I bet you carry a big whip, don’t you?”* Because Mary had been having such a good day in previous conversations, she did not take the comment in a negative manner. However, the board president’s comments about Mary’s size surprised me. I would have been offended by the comment. Mary chose to let it “slide” without further thought.

When Mary and the school board member arrived at the community public forum, it turned out not to be a challenge because only two individuals were present. In spite of the low attendance, Mary was able to express herself well when asked about a potential dress code for students which appeared to be a hot topic. *I certainly am a good listener and I do investigate and look into things. I will follow through and look for solutions; it’s about us working together.* One gentleman then asked her, “How are you going to connect with the Hispanic community because they do not get involved.” She replied by stating, *Having a similar back ground and knowing the language, I think I can be helpful, and I’m happy to help in any way possible.* He responded, “We need to address it, and I don’t have any concerns about you not being able to.” Probably the question Mary was asked most often throughout the day was why she wanted to come to Wall School District, since it was such a small town. Mary would respond that she was used to a small community and that she liked it.

On the whole, Mary felt really positive about her day at the district and said, *I could be happy here and could really contribute to the lives of children. It was an overall positive experience and I did believe I was the right fit for the district. I felt like I made new friends.*

Mary realized what an enormous responsibility it is to be a superintendent, even in a district with only 900 students and three schools. She reiterated, *This isn't just a job I'm going out for, this is a mission!* When the school board president called to inform her she was not selected, she was told that there was nothing she could have done better; she would go far and will be a great superintendent someday. The president added, "You would have done a great job here. It just isn't the right time, right now."

Mary believed that the other two final candidates for the position included another Latina (it was Stella Valverde from this study) and a white woman. In a later interview, it was revealed that Stella declined the offer of the position, and the other applicant was hired for the superintendency of Wall School District. The successful candidate's husband lives in this community.

After further reflection, Mary shared that since the outgoing superintendent was an older white man, hiring her would have been a radical change. Mary was quite different from the existing superintendent. Mary's interpretation of the situation was quite pragmatic, *Good, bad, or indifferent, that's just the way it is. I'm really naïve about these kinds of things. I cannot see why it should matter.*

Foster School District

In researching the next district where Mary applied for the top post of superintendent, she found it was also a district with 900 students and a 75% Hispanic population housed in two buildings. The junior and senior high were one school. The students appeared to be doing well academically and it also appeared to be a community with strong support for the schools. However, her excitement quickly turned to caution as she heard from several friends that this district was experiencing serious racial problems between Latinos and whites. The Office of

Civil Rights had determined that Latino students had been targeted by the principal of the high school and ruled against the district. In spite of her obvious concerns, Mary decided to continue with the interview process, hoping that she might be just what the district needed to start the healing process.

During the first board interview, there was a large group of approximately 25 people who were seated on one side of the room observing the interview. After the interview, Mary was told she was the only candidate that had acknowledged this group of observers, shaken their hands when she arrived, and thanked them when she left. One of the board members even commented on her handshake; that *he had never experienced a handshake like mine. I guess I shake hands pretty firm, but I never gave it any thought, but he sure did notice.* Mary said jokingly, *maybe it has to do with my big bones* (laughing). She was thrilled when she learned that out of the five candidates the school board interviewed, only she and a white male were finalists. She told her husband that it was a beautiful community and that she could visualize living there. As a result, her husband decided to make the second trip with her.

At her second interview, the school board members wasted no time in asking her almost immediately, *“How are you going to work with the Hispanic community, because we are having a lot of trouble with people getting along, and we need somebody who can help us with that.”* They continued their questions before she had time to respond, asking, *“And how are you going to make sure that you are fair?”* She was well-prepared for this question knowing about their community concerns, and she addressed each question in detail. She wanted this community to know that if given the chance, she could help them deal with their concerns, but she quickly got the impression that they did not know what they wanted or needed.

After the interview, Mary attended lunch with the board members. At lunch, one female board member said, “*You’re so young and you’re a woman!*” Mary immediately thought, “*Oh no, here we go again.*” *I told her no need to worry, that I am more than capable of doing the job.* Mary also described how this same board member spoke of one Mexican family that arrives each year to work the apple orchards.

I just felt like this family had their place in this person’s life as the people who come and do their work for them. It wasn’t about valuing them necessarily as human beings, but more about valuing them for the work they do for them in the fields. So, it kind of bothered me. I thought, dang, they look at them more as servants, and they do not even know what they are doing. It just made me feel like they really don’t care, even though they say they do.

Following this school board interview, Mary met with the principals. She felt like their questions were emotionally charged and, just by their tone and the way their questions were asked, reflected the racial issues that were in play in the community, “*So how are you going to handle this? How are you going to handle that? You are walking into this big job, can you handle it?*” Mary had to tell herself to “*breathe, breathe.*” *I barely got the words out of my mouth to say I was knowledgeable and have experienced volatile situations before when the high school principal blurted out, “Are you going to fire me?”* Mary could hardly believe her ears. As we discussed the situation further, I learned that she informed the group that she would not jump into such a serious situation without doing her homework first. However, when she thought that she had answered the concerns and the conversation would shift to another topic, another Caucasian principal said to her, “*You know people are coming to you and they are going to be tough. I’m from this community and I care about the kids, so I want a person who is going to handle the tough stuff.*” As Mary later reflected on the situation, she recognized that the majority of the problems in the community were adult issues, not “*kid*” issues. She began to realize that there was so much discord in the community that the position might not be the right fit for her.

This is the first time I really began to sweat. During her tour of the district, a school psychologist said, “I hope the principals didn’t make you feel beat up, but if you really want this position, and are walking into a situation like this, then you need to be ready to expect that anything can happen.” Mary’s experience with this district reminded me of an interview I had for an assistant superintendent position a few years ago. I left feeling beat up, and when I got in the car I prayed that I would not be offered the position. Luckily, it was not offered.

Following the tour, the next item on the agenda for Mary was dinner with the board of directors. One member had the nerve to ask Mary if she was a member of LULAC (League of United Latin American Citizens) which is one of the largest and oldest Hispanic organizations in the United States that advocates for Latino rights. When she responded, “No,” the member seemed relieved. They would not want a superintendent that was closely aligned with this organization, as LULAC was assisting families in preparation to sue the district. As the group was leaving the restaurant to attend the public community forum, one of the female school board members said, *“Well, you have done a good job and we are happy to have you here. It’s great you are here because you are a woman and we are interviewing you.”* As Mary was thinking of a response, the woman continued, *“Gosh, but you’re so little and you’re just so tiny and you’re so young.”*

When Mary and her husband arrived at the public forum there were about 50 people in attendance, which reminded her of the Meadow School District’s forum. The superintendent consultant approached her immediately, concerned because he had heard about the interview with the principals. *I was honest with him and told him I did not want the job anyway. He could not believe they talked to me that way and that it was very rude.* He told Mary, “This is not a good way of welcoming someone you want in your district. They should be rolling out the red

carpet for you! It is not right, how could they?" As Mary viewed the audience she noted that she should use her bilingual skills again since there were Latino folks in the audience that would be appreciative of her communicating with them in Spanish. A white male started the questioning by asking, "*Well, what are you going to do when people come yelling into your office? Can you handle that and what are you going to do?*" Even after she assured him she could handle the situation, he again asked, "*Yeah, but what if they keep coming back?*" Once again Mary responded by saying that she has an open door policy and is there to listen to all concerns. However, the man quickly cut her off and said, "*Yeah, but they're going to come in and they're going to want to chew you up and spit you out!*" At this point, Mary's husband stood up. I later interviewed him and he said that he felt the man's comments were quite inappropriate, and he just felt he needed to stand up. He said he also knew at that moment that Foster School District was not the place for her. Mary told me, *It was so weird. I started to feel like I was being ganged up on. I do not know if this was subconsciously or what, but I moved closer to this man as I kept reassuring him I would be fine.* She told me a man sitting with this gentleman then proceeded to fire off questions about her fiscal background. Once again, Mary felt attacked and began to sweat. *Then I was asked, "If your husband is going to go to school, how are you going to handle that?" "Do you have kids?" And when I answered, "No," someone joked that we really needed the numbers, so that helped.*

Later, Mary learned that the man who had continued to hound her was the owner of a nursing home that employed primarily Hispanics. She learned this from one of the Latinos who approached her afterwards to thank her and tell her that she did a good job. He said, "That man is our boss and don't listen to him, that is the way he is." Then he added "He is the one that told us to come, he wanted us to be here." Just as Mary began to think this might be a positive side of

the argumentative man, he approached her and told her she did a good job and asked if she would be willing to take the job for a year? *It was almost like he was picking the new superintendent.* The superintendent consultant ended the forum by passing out feedback forms to the audience. Later, Mary shared with me the form that the consultant had completed. The following questions and the words under each question are exactly what the consultant wrote:

Strengths I believe this candidate would bring to the district:

Honesty	Competence	Commitment
Integrity	Professionalism	Learning focused
Ethical Leadership	Caring	Genuine person

Concerns I have regarding this candidate:

None - Mary will find an opportunity that matches her skills, experience and talent.

Overall impression of the candidate:

Exceptional! Mary is a winner and has that unique ability to make those around her feel like a winner too. I am very proud of you! For what it is worth: you can measure height and weight, but you can't measure heart. Heart is always the most important!

Mary deserves to be proud of the fact that the search consultant thought so highly of her. When he later called to tell her that the board members decided they want to hire an interim superintendent, he advised Mary to not take the position. The consultant told her that the Board does not even trust themselves, and he would not want her to start her career in a situation that could be career ending. Mary told me what he said to her:

"You were stellar. I've never seen an interview like that. I wish I could have filmed it and used it for the classes I teach." He was so complimentary. He asked if he could use my paperwork in a handbook for answering questions students often ask. He helped reaffirm for me that I am a quality candidate. He also shared that they did not treat the man (Caucasian), the other finalist the way they did me. They did not ask him any of the kinds of questions they asked me and the forum did not last very long. He also stated, "They just wanted to tear you apart." He went on further to say, "Even if they had offered you the job on a continuing contract, I would have told you not to take it. You do not need to come in and be a hero and have them try to manipulate you, it just would not be a smart

move. They did ask me if you or the other finalist would be interested in a one-year contract, and I quickly told them no.”

The search consultant also told Mary that the school board members had been positive about her overall, but they wondered about her current district’s recommendation that raised concerns about Mary’s competency. The consultant added that one of the teachers from the hiring district had called her prior district and was told that the administration didn’t treat her well. Further, Mary’s old district commented that she was tough on teachers and did not follow policies and procedures for evaluating them. Mary was hurt; *I felt like crying because they basically lied about me and could damage my career, which to me is evil. It is okay to not like someone, but it is not okay to lie. This was mean!* Mary told me that sometimes there is a price to pay for holding people accountable. I agreed with Mary that there is a price to pay. In my experience when I have pushed and held staff accountable, I have received the occasional “cold shoulder” or silent treatment. What matters, however, is that students receive the best education that educators can provide.

Foster School District did indeed go with an interim position. The individual chosen was not either of the finalists, but was a white, older male. Mary confessed that she did end up crying when she learned of the Board’s decision. She told her husband, *You know I’m going to get older, but that will take time, I can’t get taller, I’m never going to be a man, or be White. And yes, I can get more experience, but I am ready now!* Mary wished that people would look at her qualifications, rather than those factors she cannot control.

Tate School District

This was a beautiful small place with only 100 students. It felt peaceful. I was a finalist from the start, along with three others. The interview was very formal and real stiff, and it was like there was no interaction. But what Mary did find refreshing was that no one in this district

mentioned her size or age. *Not once all day!* Two high school students gave her a tour of their campus and *they talked about how proud they were of the work they did together to keep the community clean and to help take care of Main Street.* An example they shared was making benches for Main Street in their wood shop class. *Then elementary students gave me a tour of their school. This was such a nice positive experience after the last place. They also asked me questions and recorded the answers. They were so cute!* Mary then had the opportunity to have a school lunch with the board members, making her day because she could continue to take in the school activities that occurred around her. After lunch, she had an interview with administrators, including principals, the business manager, and other district staff. *They asked like 29 questions and were sitting in a half circle watching me. It was really easy though because they were basic questions.*

Later Mary met with the teachers and *they looked so tired, I felt bad for them.* By the time she went to dinner she knew who the other candidates were because she had passed them between interviews. One was a white woman, who was a special services director for another district; the other two candidates were white males, one of whom was a principal in another district; and the other was an assessment director for a third district. All of the candidates went to dinner together. This was a difference from her experience with the other districts. When all of the candidates arrived at the public forum, there were only 12 community members present. For two hours, candidates rotated from one corner of the room to the other, and spoke with the individuals in attendance. Later, Mary reflected on the fact that she was not treated differently than the other candidates. She did not feel that her race played a role throughout the interview process. In my debriefing with her later, we discussed that the “fairness” of the interview was perhaps due, in part, to the current superintendent being Latino. *They all accepted me as if I was*

just like any other person. Mary thought she might not get the job because of a comment the search consultant made. After hearing Mary recently had a first interview in Kellogg School District for the assistant superintendent's job, he said, *"I'll make sure I call them and give them a reference for you."* It seemed evident to Mary that the consultant did not think she was going to get the Tate job.

In the end, when the search consultant called to tell her that the white principal had been selected for the position, Mary did not feel badly. What he didn't know was that she had just received a call from the Kellogg School District and had been offered a position as assistant superintendent! Before Mary had a chance to tell him that she had accepted the position, the consultant again stated he would call the Kellogg School District and put in a good word for her. She thanked him but told him it was not necessary saying, *I have the job!*

Kellogg School District

This school district where Mary was offered an assistant superintendent position is nestled between wheat fields, in a beautiful country setting. The small town has an abundance of parks, and the closest major city is only 80 miles away.

Mary knew that Kellogg was interviewing four candidates, and she believed she was the only candidate from outside the district. The interview process for Kellogg School District was somewhat different than applying for superintendent positions, in that only one school board member was involved in the interview process. The process, which lasted six hours, included a formal interview, an interview with principals, and a community forum. Mary stated that she had prepared just as much for this interview as she had for the superintendent positions, and was proud that her hiring district was twice the size of the other districts where she had applied

previously. The interview went well and at the end when they asked Mary, “Are there questions we haven’t asked you that we should have?” she decided to take a risk and shared the following:

Well, you know, you’ve asked me what my colleagues would think and what my supervisors would think, and I told you that I’m a hard worker and my colleagues think I’m an overachiever, and that I like to be in school and I love to learn, and that I’m fun, but you haven’t asked me what my staff thinks about me. And they were kind of like, “Oh.” And I said, The reason why I share this is because I think it’s important that you really get to know me. You know, if you’re going to consider me for this position, you need to know who I am and what I’m about. Only my staff would really be able to give you some good insight into my personality and my role as an administrator. I said, Okay, so, in a way, I’m taking a risk here because I’m going to share with you what I think my staff would say, and I’m going to be as honest as I can be.

I shared, Well, let me just answer the question for you, because I didn’t know what else to say. Most of my staff would tell you that I’m very supportive and get them what materials they need or assist them in attending a conference or dealing with a student, meeting with a parent; I’m right there. I have an open door policy, I’m available at all times and I love kids and I care about making sure that they have good quality experiences in the classroom, but some of my staff members might say that I’m tough, you know, that I expect a lot from them; that I hold them accountable. And, you know, the reason they would say that is because I am the administrator. I think it’s really important that if my role is to help people become better at what they do, then I need to use the evaluation process to help with this process. When a teacher comes to me and says, “Okay, let’s just get this observation over with and let me just sign up right now so I can get it over with,” that concerns me. And when that same person comes to me at the end of the year and says, “Okay, we don’t even have to meet about the annual evaluation, and I just want to sign off and turn it in,” that concerns me because it tells me that this tool that I’m using to help them become better is really not meaningful. This tool is a tool that has been ratified by the union and contractually holds me accountable as an administrator to make sure that I monitor what they’re doing, and so I take it seriously and I believe it’s meaningful, so I do use it. I use it in a way that really helps them see what areas they can work on and the areas that they’re doing wonderfully in. Teachers see that I find things that they could work on and sometimes believe that I’m too tough or that I may be picking on them, but I’m only using the tool that they voted on. They’re the ones that said this is what we want you to use to evaluate us. Therefore, it is possible that you could hear from people that I’m tough or that I may not be fair or whatever, but I am just doing my job. I wanted to share this and you can decide what you think about all of this, but I thought it was important that you knew. They didn’t really have a response and they just sort of sat there. I finished by saying, it’s important that we’re not continuing with the old diet because we are impacting kids. It all boils down to how are we impacting the lives of kids, and that’s what is important.

Mary decided she wanted to be the first to inform Kellogg's interviewing team on what they might hear from her district staff, should they decide to call. Presenting herself in this manner was a courageous effort at controlling the message that was delivered to the interview team.

Lunch with district and school administrators followed Mary's interview and went well. *No odd questions were asked.* When Mary was asked to tell them information about herself that did not relate to education, she said, *I love chocolate and to run, and it helps keep me fit. I also shared that I like to go to Borders and read gossip magazines and keep up with what's happening with Brad and Angelina, (laughter).* She continued laughing and smiling as she said, *They were all cracking up!* The business manager seemed concerned about whether she would really be happy living in such a small town. *Are you kidding, I love it here and could be very happy living here. It is a great place and I am excited about the opportunity.*

When Mary received the call from the superintendent to tell her she had been chosen, she was ecstatic. She called her mom, her husband, me (I cried) and other friends. I even called my doctoral chair and shared Mary's success with her. (She also was very happy for Mary.) Mary's mom came to the school where she was working as principal in order to celebrate the offer. Mary cried.

As I continue my study and approach the administrative offices where Mary now works as the assistant superintendent, I cannot help but notice it is an old elementary school. I asked Mary about her office that was once a classroom, and she responded, *It makes me feel closer to the students and I can look out my big windows and see pre-school kids playing outside.* As I stand in her office, I reflect on how her 30 by 20 foot office is bigger than the two room home in Mexico that she had earlier described to me. I mentioned this fact to Mary, and she told me that she had never looked at it that way; *I would never compare the two.* She mentioned that she

sometimes feels insignificant in the big office. I am impressed that Mary doesn't compare the two because when I initially walked into my first big principal's office, all I kept thinking about was "this is all mine." I grew up sharing a bedroom with four siblings and there was never room for anything, so for me having a big office was a big deal.

Mary was very happy to have been offered this position where she feels *valued for her skills and knowledge*, especially after all the interviews she had prior to getting this job. The Kellogg School District, with its five schools and enrollment of over 2,000 students, prides itself on a rich educational program where parents and community members are quite involved, and faculty and staff are often recognized for outstanding educational service and achievement. This community is known for supporting their schools. It also has been listed in a popular magazine as one of the top 100 school districts in the nation.

While visiting Mary, I scanned the district's regular board minutes and found Mary's name as a presenter on each one. I quickly noted that she addressed the following topics over a couple of meetings: (1) district assessment report; (2) grant matrix; (3) annual minimum basic education compliance report; and (4) World Cultures Class. It immediately became evident to me during my visits with Mary at Kellogg that she has enormous responsibility. She is in charge of many different areas which, in a larger district, would be shared among several staff members. She is also in charge of all federal and state programs, grants, curriculum initiatives, and state and district assessments.

Mary feels blessed to have *two awesome and competent assistants in the next classroom that is open via French doors which are aesthetically pleasing and functional for communication and collaboration purposes*. Her support staff treats her with respect and she is welcomed everywhere she goes in the community and in the district. In addition, Mary's new

superintendent once held her current position, so Mary knows she can count on him to help her if she needs assistance. She is grateful to have been given this wonderful opportunity to serve in Kellogg School District.

One of the ways that Mary has familiarized herself with the staff and students is by riding the yellow school buses in the mornings, and this also helps keep her connected to students. I recall how Mary told the Wall School District transportation people that she would ride the school buses, and she is doing so in Kellogg.

I was interested in what Mary's thoughts were about not serving a Latino population any longer; this school district is less than 5% Latino compared to her last district of 65%. She started slowly and answered:

You know, it feels great that I would be selected for a position in such a community as this because they are all about excellence. They do want to be the very best. They want to do what's best for kids, and the community is so involved. There are needs, and so there will be a lot of things that I can do to help enhance and augment what's already happening here, and I'm excited about that. I do feel a sense of guilt for my kids in Parkview. I feel like they need me more than the kids here, so in some ways I feel like I abandoned them, and that's really hard. I've thought long and hard about that, but I also understand the reality that Parkview offers with respect to the way the administration is set up there now. There's not much more I can do there as an elementary principal. I could impact my kids there in my building, but once they leave me and they go on to the middle school and the high school, I'm losing them, and that's what bothers me more. I make a big impact with kids when they are in elementary school, but past that I cannot. Parkview does not have support structures in place to help so many kids, so we're going to lose them, and that's what happening and that really concerns me. I just don't see how me staying there was going to help that unless I were to become the superintendent of that district. I mean, bottom line, I think I could change things if I was the superintendent there or if I was the high school principal there, but, you know, that wasn't something I was aspiring to at this time in that district.

I also realized that getting experience in the Kellogg district will help Mary learn the "ropes," and she will be able to use these skills when she becomes a superintendent of her own district. I will also be able to use what I am learning now in my current role as executive director.

In many ways, Mary views her position as more challenging than it would have been had she become the superintendent of Tate School district with 100 students. She thinks, perhaps, her responsibility is comparable to that of the superintendent at Meadow School District with 1300 students. She is just grateful to have been given the chance to “*dance the dance.*” *The most rewarding part is the learning that I am able to do with curriculum, instruction and assessment. I’m also in charge of special education and there is a lot to learn.* I believe that this is also great training for the superintendency that I know Mary will get some day. Based on her experience, she will not need to pursue only positions in a tiny district. I often think this is why I have not applied for superintendent jobs. I currently supervise 12 schools with approximately 6000 students where I have a greater impact, and I cannot see myself as a superintendent of just 900 students.

As Mary and I began to wind down her third interview, I had to ask, “Now that you have been on the job for awhile, has anyone made reference to your age, your weight, your height, your gender or your race in any way?” She responded by saying, *No, not at all. . . . And absolutely no vibes at all about my race or age, whatsoever. They love that I am different!*

The Rest of the Story

The two districts for which Mary did not receive interviews were Pace and Berry School Districts. Out of curiosity, I did look up the demographics for both of these districts. Pace was 84% white while Berry was 94% white. Mary was told she did not receive interviews because of her lack of experience. It is important to note that the person who did receive the superintendent’s job at Pace was a white male with no prior superintendent experience, and the person hired at Berry was a Hispanic male with prior superintendent experience. Mary did mention to me that she looked at the superintendency opening in the Moore School District, but

decided against applying when she heard about their financial problems. One additional note: Liza Barrajas, a Latina and one of my other participants, did get an interview in the Pace School District and had six years of central office experience.

Advice to Aspirants: “Do not let anyone get in your way, go for it”

Mary suggests that even though the majority of superintendents are white men, it is important for women to *not let anyone get in your way. Go for it!* She tells women to be themselves during their interviews and to give answers for which they know they can follow through. *Be reflective and thoughtful; take a little bit of time to answer if you need to. Remember people are looking to you to help take care of very important things, the education of their children.* Mary also commented to me that aspirants need to do their homework and be able to speak very knowledgeably about the district, and be able to address the challenges and strengths of the district. *Read everything you can get your hands on. Also, be sure to tie in your experience and educational preparation in how you can help the district.*

Conclusion

In conclusion, when Mary and I discussed how she wants to be remembered by the students, staff, and community wherever she has served, it did not surprise me that her focus was on the students.

Legacy: “I want people to remember me as someone who always did the right thing”

I think I want people to remember me as someone who always did the right thing. I want them to remember me as someone who took care of things, was fair, loved the kids, absolutely had a passion for the kids and enjoyed growing into the position more than anything. She kept us in tow, she helped us follow our dreams, and anything we ever needed, she jumped right on it and got it taken care of for us immediately. She loved the kids and would do anything for them. These are the kinds of things I hope people will say about me someday.

Stella Valverde: “I Left the Classroom for the Purpose of Making a Bigger Difference”

Introduction

When I arrived at Barnes Elementary in the Sunnyvale School District to interview Stella Valverde, a 45 year old school principal, the halls of the school were filled with 8x10 photos of students. Under their photos were the reasons they were being recognized, whether it was for citizenship, reading gains, or for being responsible and respectful. A bilingual welcome sign was huge: “Welcome to our school where no child is left behind! “Bienvenidos a nuestra escuela donde ningun nino se queda atras!”

During our first interview, Stella expressed her goals for students within minutes of when I first met her. She told me, *it is all about student success and helping the students get there*. She had been a principal for nine years and said, *I am ready for the next step of superintendency and new challenges*. She recognized that *it is time to move on*. Sunnyvale School District is located in an urban area and serves a population of over 70,000 people; it is one of the largest employers in the county. The Hispanic population of the city is significantly above the state average. Although, the school district is approximately 58% Hispanic, Barnes Elementary School is approximately 86% Hispanic. When I returned for our second interview, Stella had moved to River Elementary School where she continued to serve as principal. The Latino population at River Elementary is closer to the school district’s percentage of 63%.

Personal History: “It was embedded in us that education was important”

As I entered the office area it was full of life. Students were talking with each other as they waited to be helped, and bilingual secretaries were talking in Spanish to parents and children. Two of the secretaries were speaking in both Spanish and English, as they conversed with students. I inquired about the sign by the front door that said “Today is English day!” I was

told that on this day all students were to speak English, as the school is a dual-language school. On half the days of the week English is spoken and on the other half of the week Spanish is spoken; in the office whatever language is necessary to communicate with families is used.

One of the secretaries informed me she was to take me to a grade-level meeting where Stella and the teachers were discussing intervention reading strategies for the children. After introductions were made, the meeting continued. Stella was adamant that *these students can achieve more and that the staff had to implement these new reading strategies immediately; there is no time to waste*. I saw on the faces of the fourth grade teachers that they felt they had already done everything they could do to help these students. But, by the end of the meeting, the teachers agreed to implement the new schedule and reading interventions the very next day.

After the meeting, Stella escorted me to her office so we could begin the interview, as she did not have a lot of time. She apologized for not being able to spend the whole day with me because her supervisor was coming out to the building that morning (He ended up not coming.) Stella said, *We are under a lot of stress to make adequate yearly progress each year, and that each year it is more and more challenging*. She expressed her belief that if expectations are kept high and the staff believes the students can do the work, *they all will achieve*. She then spoke of her family and how important education was to her parents:

My parents came to the United States; they both were born in Mexico and both had minimal education. I come from a family of seven, four brothers and two sisters. It was embedded in us that education was important throughout our whole lives; that education is something that we needed to strive for, because my parents didn't have that and they knew it was important. It was interesting. We had dad make a tape and on the tape he'd pretty much said how hard their life was. I mean we were very migratory farm laborers. We all took our turns at being out in the fields, working with them. But he did say that his one goal was to break the cycle for his kids. It was important for us to get an education. That's basically the background I have, just living in the United States with a very traditional Hispanic kind of background. My brothers and sisters all went to college.

She added that her dad went up to grade six in school and her mother to grade four. This is a similar story to that of my own parents. My father claims to have attended up to the sixth grade, and my mother had to quit in the third grade to stay home and help her mother clean house and prepare meals for the other nine children. Stella believes that because her parents believed education was so important, that *all of my siblings are college-educated and one of my brothers is a superintendent.*

Upon reflecting more about her childhood and what it was like when she arrived home each day from school, she said:

Usually my parents were at work, and so being a girl, the female in the culture, it was put upon us to have dinner ready and get things ready for the boys and mom and dad and to try to get that started. The house was empty. But during the winter it wasn't, because obviously there was no farm laboring kind of work then. It's fond, good memories. Looking back now, I'm thankful for anything that we had. It was good.

When I asked her about people who encouraged her while she was going to school, she identified teachers:

I had some outstanding teachers. I know that my fourth grade teacher was an awesome teacher, and I knew in fourth grade that I wanted to grow up and be a fourth grade teacher. That was kind of where I set that goal. You know, I was just thinking about her last night. Mrs. B. was just very encouraging; she pushed us and believed in us and did it in a very nurturing way. I really enjoyed her. I don't know just one thing she did; I think she was just outstanding in all things that she did.

Stella speaks with great pride when she shares stories of her own family, which consists of her husband, who is a teacher and supports her in her career, and her five children, who range in age from a five-year-old kindergartner to a young adult. She also described the impact of having a child with *Down syndrome . . . [It is] a truly life changing experience* and she views education very differently as a result. *This has changed my life in a positive way forever.* She added that *having a special needs child has taught me to be more patient and much more aware of children with different needs and different learning styles.* Her special child is her oldest, and

he is the only boy in the family. Stella pointed out that *he is surrounded by four sisters who think he is just amazing!*

Career and Profession: "Raring to go!"

Stella described her career from the time of her graduation from college to the happy moment of reaching her goal:

Upon graduating from college, I was hired as a fourth grade teacher. I reached my goal. It was so satisfying. Loved it. In between there I had my son, and so we moved to a district because they were doing some amazing things with research in the area of my son's needs. That took us over there for a year. I really felt like it was a good experience. But I felt out of my element because it was so different from the environment I had grown up and taught in. Moved again and taught fourth-fifth grade and then taught in a middle school there. I decided that after ten years there, I needed more. Went back to school and got my masters in educational administration and then ended up in a smaller town. I was a principal there at the elementary school. I did my internship at a middle school. Then I was principal at the elementary and intermediate school. I was fortunate enough to actually open up the school, a brand new school. It was such a great experience. And then after five years there, something opened up which was closer to home, plus with my parents who are getting older, this was better.

When Stella looks to the future she says she is *raring to go!* After ten years as a principal she is ready for new challenges. She feels prepared for the next step in her career, and for Stella, it is a superintendency. She is looking ahead for positive factors in her life, in part because after her dad suffered a heart attack, it had been very difficult for her to balance family needs while managing the challenge of running a school well. Now, she hopes that she will be fortunate enough to get a superintendent's position somewhere.

Stella believes that her position as principal working in a demanding district has helped to train her for the post of superintendency. She understands that she cannot walk right into a district where everything is just right. She explained:

The six years in this district have been very challenging. I was placed in a challenging building where staff did not communicate, or collaborate, on anything. It took about four years to set them on the right path. When I left the school, we had made great gains and had made adequate yearly progress; it felt good and was very satisfying, but it was a lot

of hard work with a lot of ups and downs. Then I came to Barnes Elementary and there were some of the same issues, except maybe up a notch or two. It's just a difficult building. I'm good at getting people to work together, but it has taken its toll. It was especially hard when I started at Barnes; my dad had a heart attack, so I had a lot of personal things going on as well and so it was a huge undertaking. My dad is better now, never the same, but better. So starting here with those personal issues going on and then starting my superintendent program, I had a lot going on. So, I continue to look forward to new challenges.

When I inquired how she feels about moving from one challenging school where she made such great growth, then moving again to a school where she has to start over, I was not surprised at her response. *Our administration places people where they see the need and so I am fine with that. You know, I go where I need to go and do what I need to do.* As a result, her leadership is sought out, and her willingness to respond to a district's need is a compliment to Stella's skills and knowledge.

Stella identified many role models and mentors in her life, *mostly male superintendents who have encouraged me to pursue a superintendent's position.* She also mentioned that she has a Latina superintendent friend that she can look to for guidance and other female principals with whom she is close. Stella also respects the path her brother has taken as a teacher, then as a principal and now as a superintendent. She appreciates having him as a mentor. *I am able to bounce a lot of ideas off him. These important people in my life are great role models and have done some great work, and they all encourage me.* This made me reflect on all of the mentors and role models I have had in my life, my mother being the most important. I have been fortunate to have had so many individuals in my life who cared deeply for me and who guided me. None of my professional mentors, though, were Latina; I do believe this would have been helpful as I pursued educational administration.

As Stella described her leadership style, she pointed out that she is very honest:

Honest. I'm very honest. I will put it out there. I don't believe in fluffing things up. I just like to put it out there so that people know exactly where I stand and where I'm coming from. I believe that I have the ability to look at both sides of an issue, and in the end, if I'm wrong, I will say I'm wrong. I don't have a problem with conceding if it's truly what's best for kids. I am easy-going, yet I hold people accountable. I believe that those who know me will take the time to come in and talk to me. They will tell me what they're thinking and I will sit and listen. And so I think I have a style that my door is open, that says it is okay, come talk to me. No matter how hard the issue is, you know I will listen. And again, as I've said before, I think I have the ability to say, Yes, I'm wrong. I think we really need to do it your way or this way. And I do give to people – I empower people. I mean I don't have any qualms with letting others run with something. Communication has to be a real big key though; don't leave me on the door step. You've got to pull me in so that I can support you, and I think my staff; they are so good. They are awesome. So, yes, I believe in empowering.

Stella doesn't view herself as a Latina leader, but as a strong leader who happens to be

Latina. She described it as:

You know, I have to be honest. I don't view myself like that. I view myself as a strong leader, period. It probably goes back to some deep, dark childhood thing where people say I don't look the part (she is blond and fair-skinned.) They would tease me, because I didn't look the part. Then the other side would tease me, because I had a Spanish name, but didn't look it. I had a harsh upbringing. I grew up on the wrong side of the tracks and walked outside to defend myself. It's just like when we went to the migrant camps, all of my little Latina friends, would say, "Look at you." I see myself as a role model, and so it's neat when I can really relate to what the kids are going through, and when I'm actually speaking Spanish to them. They love that and ask, "How did you learn?" And then I tell them my background and they are just amazed. So I enjoy that. I enjoy letting them know that I know where they came from.

Because Stella "doesn't look the part," she often surprises the Latino parents at the school when she begins conversing in Spanish. She described how it usually plays out:

Parents come into the school and they often do not realize that I speak Spanish and they begin to share with each other in Spanish what they are going to say to me. Then I turn around and answer their questions in Spanish, and they are very surprised!

When asked to reflect on the meaning she brings to all that she has accomplished and what has inspired her to look for the next big challenge, she explained:

I left the classroom for the purpose of making a bigger difference. Now I'm thinking in terms of a district. Classroom experience is great and so is building experience. I'd like to get district office experience and make a big difference. Inclusive of the whole community piece, I think that to me is a big goal. I would really like to be a superintendent in a district that I can relate to, that needs my skills and my background. I think the challenges that I have faced in low-performing schools have really prepared me to deal with both staff and students that need that extra push, whether it be in delivery of instruction or how we get our kids where they need to go. So I'm ready. I feel ready.

She would like to continue working with a large Latino population; this is where she feels she is most needed. *I want to give back to my community, and serving Latino families will be like giving back. I feel that with my background I can relate to their struggles. I have had opportunities that I want others to realize.*

Stella does see challenges ahead for females aspiring to the superintendency and voiced her concerns in this way:

I think there are challenges. I believe, and maybe wrongly so, that the field is so male-dominated that being a female, that in itself, in a quote, unquote man's world, is a challenge. Then there is the ethnicity factor, and you know it's out there, whether it's spoken or unspoken. It's out there. So I think those are two things. The stereotypical things you have to overcome. You can only do what you can do. Unless somebody's willing to open the door to let you get your foot in, I think there may be a lot of door slamming. I don't know. I'll just deal with it as it comes. I do feel good about my work and the reputation or, quote, unquote, the legacies that I've left in the schools that I've been in, but still – it's still out there. I think that's a major challenge.

Stella, nevertheless, is confident in her skills and preparation for submitting her application and materials for superintendent's positions that are now posted. Her professors from the superintendent's program have been very encouraging and have discussed openings with her. *I am ready, I do feel confident, and it will all depend on what the districts out there are looking for.*

Challenges and Success of the Superintendent Interview Process: “We’re told you’d better start in a small district”

Stella, as usual, was pressed for time when I returned for her second interview. She had something unexpected come up so we got right to the interview. On this day, we focused on the job hunt for the superintendent’s position. She was more than happy to tell me about the two interviews she experienced.

Moore School District

Stella applied for a superintendent’s position in the Moore School District, a district with four schools and 1,600 students of which 90% are Latino. She was one of four candidates that were interviewed.

She mentioned that if she could do it all over again, she probably would not have submitted an application, as she had previously worked in this district as a principal. She elucidated her reasons, *It was difficult because people have preconceived notions about you in doing a principal’s job and there were probably people there who were uncomfortable because of the demands I once put on them.* I could really relate to what she was saying because I hope to return to my hometown someday where I once was a principal, and apply for the superintendent’s job when it next opens. It was as if Stella read my mind. She said, *just like you want to do someday in your hometown.* She continued, *There were also people there that are going to like me because I praised them, but I did have an uneasy feeling going into the interview.* I then shared with Stella that I would get the superintendent’s position in my hometown based on either of the following positions: “They want me because they know me, or they don’t want me because they know me.” Stella, however, did not think there were board members who knew her because of turnover in the district. But, then she said, *there were people observing during the interview [whose] input was part of the process, and I thought, “Oh,”* (laughter), *and*

“Oh, oh,” and others, I thought, “Okay.” It was just a different kind of feeling. I took a moment to reflect and wonder if I knew all the current board members in my hometown; it was a warm feeling to realize that “Yes, I do,” and I believe that they all are favorable towards me. I asked Stella if she knew in advance which people were going to observe her, and had the search consultant prepared her for this? She said, Yes, but who would have guessed there would be 20-25 people? There were community members, custodians, teachers, parents, the fire chief and the police chief (lots of laughter)! The good news was that she got an interview, I did make it past the first round of interviews and I became a finalist there, but they were going through a lot of turmoil and were looking for someone with experience. Stella knew going into the interview that the district was experiencing some major financial problems; when she heard that they also wanted someone with a strong financial background, she understood their need. Stella concluded, I didn’t blame them. She added that she believes there is a reason why things work out the way they do. In the end, the district did employ a white female for the position.

Stella had also applied to the Meadow School District, *but decided not to go through with the interview process because I had heard there was an inside candidate, and I pretty much knew they would offer it to Norma (Garcia).* Stella believes that Norma is perfectly qualified.

Wall School District

Another district where Stella applied was in the Wall School District, a small town with three schools of 900 students. Wall’s population is mostly Latino at 75%. This is a district where Stella felt she would be a good fit, as she would be able to continue serving a high Latino population. When she received the call for the first interview, she was very excited. Once she made it past the first round and became a finalist, she recalled the Board process:

It was a day-long process where you met with different groups throughout the day. You were interviewed by the board of directors, the different administrative teams, student

leaders, and the teaching staff; then there was a community forum in the evening, which was very interesting.

She started her day-long process with a tour of the facilities and then met with the transportation staff and a couple of other groups. Throughout this process, Stella wondered if she was the right person for the job. *When someone asked me if I had questions of them, I asked, "Well what are you looking for in a leader?" I felt like I gained a lot from their answer as I could check to see if we were matching up. Was I what they needed?*

When Stella was in her Board interview she mentioned to me that she was busy checking the Board out, and how they related to one another. *I wanted to see the type of relationship they had.* I thought, "Smart lady." During this interview with the school board there were administrators and community members observing her. During the rest of the day, she told me that there was always the same school board member present when she met with the other groups. Stella found the interview with the principals the most *calming interview, and I think it was because I am in their shoes and know their daily struggles.* When she met with the teachers' group, they had a concern that Stella lacked secondary high school experience. In order to reassure them, she said, *I would be spending a lot of time at their level, not that it would be all consuming, but just so that I could get more comfortable. I reminded them I had worked at the middle level.* Stella told me, *you know kids are kids, and learning is learning. I think that is my bottom line.*

One issue came up at the public forum that caught Stella off guard. Someone asked her about her stance on abortion and how she felt about Planned Parenthood agencies coming into the schools. *This was a real pertinent issue [for them] that came up and threw me for a loop.* She gathered from the parent's questions that they struggled with this concern and others.

[It] appeared to be a hot topic. People have preconceived notions and very firm ideas about that sensitive topic, and it just got to the point where one parent said, "They're promoting abortion, they're promoting abortion." I finally had to say, "That is not their agenda. That is not what they're about." I told them I would always refer back to policy. You know, what is your board policy on issues such as these? So it wasn't heated. It was just interesting, and it ranged from that to showing favoritism because somebody has a name in the community. My response again was, "Well, I don't know anybody here, (chuckling) so I would hope that that doesn't happen." When it was all said and done, I enjoyed it and had a good experience. As I was going through it, it was like, "Ah, who wants to be here; why am I doing this?" But, it was challenging. It was fun and it really did make me learn a lot about myself.

Another interesting point that Stella made was that at the public forum no one asked her to speak Spanish and no one spoke Spanish to her. She thought perhaps the Latinos in the audience all spoke English. Then she and I discussed how we were surprised that no one tried to test her Spanish, because she could have claimed to speak Spanish, but then not be able to do so. We wondered if she was treated this way because she looks more white than Latina (laughter).

When Stella found out that the job was hers, she was conflicted. *I was offered the superintendent's position in the Wall School District, but at the time I didn't feel I could accept the position, just based on my personal life.* Her parents had health issues and she did not wish to be farther away from them, so she respectfully declined, but *remorse set in two weeks later. And to this day, I think, "Oh, I should have just done it." I know they do not just hand out jobs like this everyday.* When Stella told her brother she declined the job offer, he told her, *"You should have called me. Why didn't you call me?" I told him, "I do not know why I didn't call you."* Stella's husband was willing to support whatever career decisions she made. *He reassured me that there'd be other jobs.* Stella thought she would have been a match for this district because she is bilingual and could have communicated in both Spanish and English with the community and with the school district. She also explained that in doing her research about the community, she learned they had two different types of Hispanic communities. There were the Latinos who

were newly arrived and those who had lived in the community for a while; this difference caused some friction between them. *I could have related to both worlds considering my upbringing and my parent's upbringing.*

In the end, a white female was offered the position of superintendent in the Wall School District. The other finalist was Mary Ramirez whose portraiture was told at the beginning of this chapter.

The Rest of the Story

Since Stella had sent out applications before she made the decision not to actively seek a superintendent's position, her phone continued to ring for additional interviews for a period of time. Although receiving the calls made Stella feel appreciated, she declined those opportunities. Nevertheless, Stella feels confident that her phone will ring again this spring. When I asked her if she could name any of the districts she is giving serious consideration to, she mentioned Foster School District. I cautioned her to be thorough in her research, as I know firsthand the experiences Mary Ramirez had in her interview with Foster, as well as the reason why the position is posted again; the district chose to go with an interim superintendent for the current school year.

In working with the women in my study, I was curious why they more often than not chose to apply in small districts. I asked Stella why this seemed to be the case. Stella answered that this is the advice the Latinas have received from professors and search consultants. *We're told you'd better start in a small district.* I find this disappointing, as I know women who have started with their first superintendency in larger districts; in my research in this northwestern state, I discovered that when I compared the percentages of women to men in district leadership roles, there are more women than men in larger districts. After I shared this information with

Stella, she thought for a moment and then said, *I need to ask myself why I am only looking in smaller districts? My husband always tells me I shouldn't limit myself.*

As I write this dissertation, Stella is “raring to go” once again and wants to pursue the job that will be the “right fit.” She never again wants to put herself in a position of regret for not accepting a superintendent’s position if one is offered to her.

Advice to Aspirants: “Women need to be seen as strong coming in”

I asked Stella what attributes or characteristics she thinks females need to become a superintendent, and what advice I should give to others who may now be in the same place in their careers as she is in hers.

I think they have to be seen as strong coming in. Because I think, again, that it's such a male-dominated profession that if you don't project the strong image, I think you will be seen as extremely weak and you'll be out the door in two years. I think that's big. You really have to know your stuff too. In this day and age of reform you need to know how to get things done and know assessment and data. I think that you have to be a well-rounded person. You can't just go out and build a position because of your ethnicity or because you're male or female. So those are just a couple of things, but I do think that you can't get by on just being who you are; you really have to know your stuff. I think the advice I'd give anybody going out for a job, especially a superintendent position, is be prepared. You need to know the background of the district; know what you're walking into, all the nuances of a district. There are some districts that are still very old-fashioned and they don't like outsiders coming in. I think, just again, getting a feel for the community and really highlighting their strong points as you're going in, and that way they'll know, at least, you've taken the time to know what they are all about. Aspiring superintendents – you know old Nike – just do it! You know if you have that desire and if you have that need and if that's something that you want to pursue, there's no reason in the world that you can't do it. I didn't think I'd ever want to be in a superintendent cohort experience, but, I've loved it. It has been so beneficial. You network with these people and grow with them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we discussed the legacy Stella wishes to leave behind, and she was straightforward in her response.

Legacy: "I want it to be a better place than when I got here"

She stated her dreams in this way:

I want it to be a better place than when I got here. I just want the education that students are receiving to be the best that it can be at that point in time. I always want what is best for all children.

Liza Barrajas: "I Want to be Able to Reach More Students"

Introduction

When I first interviewed my third participant, Liza, a 49 year old central office administrator in the Viewcrest School District, she was in her sixth year as a director and wearing many different hats in her position. She had not been a principal previously, but this had not prevented her from applying for superintendent vacancies. *I am confident and ready.* She enjoyed working closely with her administrative team, and it showed in the degree to which she involved them in day-to-day business. She was very professional and friendly. Viewcrest School District is located in a small, agriculturally-based community, rich in history, tradition and culture. Hispanic students make up approximately 81% of this school district's population. When I returned for the second interview, Liza had great news to share that she had been promoted to an assistant superintendent in her current district.

Personal History: "I had that drive!"

When I arrived at the Viewcrest School District office, I found it was housed in an old elementary school, along with an alternative high school campus. As I waited for Liza to return from a meeting out of the building, the Hispanic secretary to the superintendent was curious about my study and we chatted. After Liza arrived, we went to her office area which was a very large room that is also used for meetings with teachers and principals. There were two items on her walls that made me think we might have some common interests. One was a picture of Frida

Kahlo, a famous Mexican artist, whom I adore for her strength and perseverance through a troubled life. The other was a print by a local artist called “Global Gardens,” which displays many different cultures. I had given this print as a present to a friend when she completed her Ph.D. It is now on her wall, and I also have a copy of the print in my office. The conversation about the artwork helped Liza and me become acquainted.

Liza is third generation and her parents migrated, following the crops from Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Michigan. Her story in her words follows:

My grandfather came from Mexico when he was about 14 years old. He was an orphan, and so he crossed the states at the age of 14 and lived in Texas. Then in his adult years, he migrated back and forth to this state and he wound up establishing his home here. My dad, his son, is one of nine siblings who also migrated a lot with my grandfather at that time between Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Michigan. All of those states that are common migratory states. My dad made his home here in the early 50s when he met my mom who was also from the same town, but they met each other here as they were working out in the hop fields. Through all of that back and forth, they did wind up settling here in the 50s with many other families that were migrating up north at that time. Many families that lived in southern Texas at that time established their homes here and were really the first generations of families that were beginning to settle. There were very few Latinos at that time that lived here. I went through the school system here, and probably in every classroom of 25 students, there were maybe three or four Latinos. Well now we know it is the opposite of that. The culture has changed quite a bit.

I’m one of five children and we all went through school here. Each of us graduated from the local high school. I was the second in the family to go to college. My older brother went to the university for a couple of years and then he entered an electrician apprenticeship program. When I graduated from high school, I didn’t immediately go on to college. I was working here at a local bank and, of course, my parents were quite happy. I had graduated, I had a job, and they thought I had just the perfect thing. When I approached them, asking them and telling them I wanted to go on to college, it was a real challenge. I didn’t realize how much resistance I was going to get. There was a real roadblock. Fortunately, one of the ladies that I worked with at the bank helped me complete all of my admission materials for college. So I went, despite the fact that my parents were very unhappy. They refused to take me on the first day as most parents do, and so my older sister who was married by then went ahead and took me.

I got myself settled in. I went to college and that was in the mid-to-late 70s when I was in school. My major at that time was going to be society and justice. I went to school for a couple of years. At the time I was in college, my husband was at a different university, but we got married and moved back here. Then we did some work around here, in banks and

so forth and I had my two girls. I had that drive! I wanted to return to college. It was still in the back of my mind. Having worked at a couple of banking institutions here and in a couple of attorney offices, I then transitioned into a clerical position at the school district. I became the clerical assistant in the superintendent's office. Within a year the superintendent's secretary had retired so I moved into her position. I was in that role probably about 7 or 8 years as a superintendent's secretary. I still wanted to go back to school and I was quite involved in the school system then because my oldest daughter was in school, and so I was doing a lot of volunteer work. That just made me even hungrier to go back to school and go into education in lieu of society and justice. So I started to go to school part time. Fortunately I had my mother and my mother-in-law who could help us with the kids because both of us were working. I was taking evening classes and so my husband would take care of the children the majority of the time, but when he couldn't, mom and dad or my mother-in-law and my father-in-law would help out as much as possible.

I could relate to the circumstances of Liza's parents not understanding the importance of a college education. I remember all too well my own father being extremely upset when I went off to college. His belief was that I should stay home and work, learn to cook, and grow up to be a good wife. I was lucky that I had a mother who did not want me to learn how to cook and be anyone's wife. She wanted me to go to school and grow up to be someone special. I heard this almost daily from her, but it was in contrast to what I heard from my dad every day. Liza then shared how traditional her family was while she grew up:

My parents were very traditional in the sense that women and girls at that time really had their place in the home. My mom worked out in the fields with us, but for the most part she was a homemaker, and so I think their expectation was that I graduate from high school because they hadn't acquired that. So they perceived my graduation as a huge accomplishment. I had a stable job that came with benefits, so that was a second accomplishment. The third thing that they envisioned as an accomplishment for me at that time was to have gotten married and to have children. The fact that I wanted to go to college was almost like an insult because they felt I was abandoning the family. I think the biggest barrier was them not understanding the importance of post secondary education and the fear that I would leave the home and not come back. Luckily, eventually, my parents understood the importance of me becoming educated.

It made a world of difference to Liza when her parents started to understand the value of an education. After Liza finished her education she did stay in her community, making her parents happy.

Career and Profession: "It's a double challenge, because you have to work that much harder and speak that much louder"

When Liza returned to school, it took her an additional two and a half years to complete her degree. It pleased her that she could become a teacher in the same district where she had grown up and was already raising a family. She relayed her story:

I began with short-term contracts and then landed a permanent job teaching kindergarten. I taught kindergarten a couple of years and then I moved up to fifth grade and taught fifth grade for four years, and third grade for one year. During those years, I was still going to school because I went back to get my master's. I just had that drive. I really had a yearning for the learning and the acquiring of additional certifications in the field. I went on and got my master's degree and that was in the field of Special Education. After that, I kept teaching for a couple of years, but I wanted more. I mean more challenge, and I wanted to get deeper into the work of education. I wanted to be able to reach more students. So I decided I was going to go into administration. I pursued my administration credentials and completed my internship. I finished there and that's when I got a job offer in Oregon. My girls, by that time, were in middle school and, of course, they were in tears because they had all their friends here. They didn't want to move, so my husband and I had these lengthy discussions. Do we want to break the continuity that we have here in our family? Ultimately, I decided not to take the job, which was really heartbreaking because it's very rare you find a fit, and it just felt like the right fit. The people were just so inviting; the school was – just the dynamics of the staff – I thought this was right. But anyway, my family comes first, so I said, "No." But fortunately that same spring, having turned down the principal position, this director's position came open here in the district. That was about seven years ago. I have been in this role since. Now I am pursuing my superintendent's certificate (now completed), and I am thinking if the right position opens up, I will consider it. So now I'm grappling with what now? Throughout this whole process, of course, my girls have grown and they are gone. They are both in college and my husband and I are back at the table having these discussions again. Where do we go from here? So that's where I'm at.

Another internal struggle I heard from Liza when she considered leaving her current position was that there are many programs and initiatives she started and is committed to seeing them fulfilled. Liza feels fortunate in her professional life that she has had many mentors along the way. *My mentors have been both men and women who were there for me and are people I am still friends with today.* Liza even goes back in memories and talks about the superintendent she first worked with as a secretary, and how he had a positive influence on her. *He constantly talked*

to me about going back to school and completing my degree. He would share with me what opportunities were out there. She also mentioned the principal with whom she completed her internship and who acts as her confidante in the district. I can go back to her and share things with her and we brainstorm back and forth. I've been fortunate that she is still here and we work together so closely.

Liza views her leadership style as both distributive leadership and collaborative. *I believe in collaborating with others and feeding off of their strengths and brainstorming with them, that is just my style. I also believe in empowering people, whether it is my secretary or someone else.*

She also finds her opportunities as a Latina leader fulfilling and challenging:

It's rewarding, but it's real difficult at the same time. Not only being a Latina, but just being a female leader in the community and within the district. It's a double challenge, because you have to work that much harder and speak that much louder. You have to work with initiatives and issues that need to be dealt with in order to have an impact on student achievement. But it's rewarding in the sense that I can be a role model for others. This means not only the students that go through our system as I'm in the buildings, but also other younger Latinas who are going through the educational system and see a roadblock. It helps when they have opportunities to talk to me or see what I have been able to accomplish. It's rewarding for me because their expression is, I want to do what you are doing. You were able to do it. Share with me how you did it. So I think it's real rewarding in the fact that you can . . . one can be a role model for them.

Liza is also a Latina role model for her own daughters. She clearly sees this fact as a benefit.

I think it has strengthened my immediate family. My husband and I think it's been a real asset for our girls to see me in this role. To know that as a female and as a Latina that they can have those opportunities, and that they are open to other ethnicities. But as I look at my extended family (in-laws), I feel like there's a gap. There's a gap there because I'm so involved in my job, and you know how many hours these positions demand. I want to make sure that I still have time left for my girls and my husband, where [there] is the time to still have that connection with the extended family, which is still important. And, of course, if you still have your parents, you want to spend time with them, and then there are your own siblings. This is where I feel it's had a not so good impact. And I have to be more purposeful about making sure that I allow time to go visit and still touch bases with all of them.

When I inquired what all of this means to her, and ask what inspires her, she responds with:

I always have the need to learn more. There's so much to learn. I refuse to be in a position of status quo because I know I wouldn't be benefiting anybody, let alone myself. A lot of individuals do that and they are quite comfortable but, for me, I reach a certain point after a certain number of years where I know there's more to be learned. I know there is more that I can do.

Liza said that she has already overcome many challenges in her life and she can handle any additional challenges that may be associated with looking for the right superintendent position.

I don't think there will be any more challenges than what I have already had to overcome. I know how important it is to be knowledgeable about the work that you're doing, so that you can provide the leadership and the guidance that's needed within a district. I know how difficult it is, as a Latina, to work with the communities and really know the system and all that goes with it. The challenges might be greater as a Latina superintendent in the sense that you are at the top and people would look at you 100% at all levels for that guidance and leadership. So always being one step ahead of them, I think maybe would be a challenge.

Liza described how working her way up through her current system has come with challenges. *I used to teach under some of the principals I now work with and supervise their programs, even though I am not their direct evaluator. I do conduct supervisory walks and provide them with feedback on what I see.* I laughed at hearing this as I thought back to when I was a principal in the district where I grew up and went to school, and how I would conduct learning walks through the classrooms of teachers who had taught me. I recall they appeared nervous. Liza continued with her story saying that she respects the relationships she's had with her principals, acknowledging that they have been well nurtured. Furthermore, she pointed out, *My job is to support principals around instructional leadership and I work closely with our superintendent to make sure our work is evolving.*

In her experiences seeking superintendencies, I asked Liza if she thought that as an aspiring Latina superintendent she should apply only in certain geographical areas, and she responded:

You know it's interesting you ask that, because of the two positions that I am currently considering, one is in a community that is predominately Hispanic (Meadow School District). So I thought that would be a good fit, because it's real similar to what our community here offers. The other district that I was looking at was completely the opposite, predominantly Caucasian in a small rural, wealthy community. I am being strongly encouraged to apply by the search consultants, and what is appealing is that it is a pre-K-8 district, not a pre-K-12 (Pace School District). It is a feeder to a larger district. Anyway I haven't completed the application, and I don't know if I will. But I wonder if it would be equitable in that field where the demographics are so different. I may never know. There is only one way to find out, and that is to go through the process, but I wonder.

As Liza contemplated the process of applying for a superintendent's position, she was grateful to have her husband's full support. He is a director in another district. *He is behind pushing me. "You can do it and you must try." He knows that I have this yearning to learn so much more.* This is like my husband who knows and understands that I will continue to take course work for my own professional growth. Now that I am completing my doctorate, he asks me which law school will I be applying to! My husband has also been very supportive in our moving to other cities so I can pursue my career goals.

Challenges and Successes of the Superintendent Interview Process: "It had to be the right fit for me"

Liza did pursue going through the process of interviewing for both a superintendent's and an assistant superintendent's position. When she applied, she remembered hearing her superintendent professor's words, *"It needs to be the right fit."* So she took a risk and applied in a district about which she had heard many positive comments. *I thought since it is a small district I would be a good fit, though I knew it would be difficult for me to get through the process; the reason I thought that is because I knew the demographics.*

Pace School District

In doing her homework, Liza found out that Pace School District was 83% White and only 6% Latino. She knew this district was quite different from her current one. Nevertheless, she said, *I decided I would give it a try (chuckle). Then the consultant called me and I was one out of six or seven that the school board decided they would interview for the first round. She found the search consultant very helpful as they had several conversations on the phone prior to the interview. The consultant really encouraged her to apply and I'm sure he knew it would be a real benefit for me to go through the process. He would tell me, "This is what they are looking for" and "You might want to prep yourself up on this."* She appreciated his kind words before going into the interview. *He chatted with me and said, "Just be yourself. Really, just be yourself."* *And he was in the interview the whole time and would make eye contact with me and nod his head in support.* Liza and her husband went up for the interview the evening before so that they would have time to check out the town and district. Her interview lasted approximately one hour with a combination of people observing. Liza believed that in addition to the board of directors, there was a combination of teachers, classified individuals, a principal and a secretary who observed in the background. She described the situation:

I only interacted with the school board members. The others just listened and took notes. I felt very relaxed, very comfortable and, I think, in my observation of them, they were more nervous (laughter.) Then the board chair posed the questions for the cadre of individuals, and I could tell he was nervous. Maybe because it was the first time he'd gone through this process. I don't know – for whatever reason it was real obvious to me that they were probably more nervous than I was. Anyway, I didn't think it was too terribly bad, but obviously I wasn't the fit because I didn't make the final round. They were looking for somebody who had a strong background in bonds and levies and, though I've been involved with them, my experience was more working in the background, in the operational piece, not so much in the forefront. Even though I know I could have done the job, maybe they were looking for somebody that was more of a fit with what their community and demographics, and obviously I wasn't that person. I think I would have stood out like a sore thumb (referring to being Latina). But in any event, I thought the whole process worked pretty well. It was a good experience for me. In a quick

and short conversation with the search consultant afterwards, he said, "You did a good job," and then he said, "I really do think you'd be a good fit," but at that point it was out of his hands. It was okay if the board didn't think I was the fit they were looking for. When I got home, the board chair left a message on the recorder, but did not say whether I got the job or not, so I called him back the next day. I never heard from him but received a letter two days later saying I was not chosen for the second round of interviews.

Liza shared more about the interview and the fact that she felt competent in answering all of their questions, especially the ones around curriculum and instructional leadership and even budgets. She was proud of her ability to ask probing questions of the interview panel. Liza described another encounter in which she asked a question. *The board chair could not answer my question, so he looked around (laughter), "Who can answer that question?"* However, the tables were turned when she didn't feel qualified to discuss the subject of bonds; *I was not able to go deep enough on the question about the bond.* She added that discussing bond rates was not something she was really familiar with, *I wasn't real articulate in that piece.* Liza also felt like she had connected with a couple of the board members. She recalled that there were four men and one female board members, all Caucasian. *Overall, I was pleased that I made it to the first interview and had the opportunity for the experience.* In the end, a white male was named to the superintendent's post in Pace School District.

Two additional places that Liza considered applying to were Meadow School District and Wall School District, but she didn't follow through with the process. When I inquired why she didn't pursue the superintendent positions at these two districts, she explained her reasoning, *I chose not to apply in Meadow because I thought that there was somebody in the picture who was targeted to get the job and she [Norma Garcia] did get the position; I'm real excited for her.* Liza also explained her decision not to apply in the Wall School District. She weighed the pros and cons of this job, and decided it might not be the right one. *I'm not going to move into a*

position just because I want a title of superintendent. I want it to be purposeful, meaningful, and the right fit for everybody.

Mill School District

Next Liza decided to pursue an assistant superintendent's position in a district that was 48% Latino and 50% Caucasian. It was about half the size of her current district and she loved the location. The position was assistant superintendent of teaching and learning and the district had recently restructured their upper management. Liza said, *This position was newly created, and work was redistributed. A lot of the responsibilities were similar to what I do now with the exception of evaluating principals.* Liza thought there were eight people interviewed; two finalists were selected and she was one of them!

When she walked into the first interview there were approximately 20 people involved and they sat in a u-shape formation. *They took turns asking me questions and it only took about one hour. I knew I must be a finalist, as colleagues in my district kept calling me to tell me that people from Mills were checking my references.* Liza was a little surprised as the superintendent had told her they would do a site visit if she was selected as a finalist, *but he must not have meant a physical site visit because they called everyone (laughter), not just people from my résumé!* Liza had expected a formal day-long process when she returned for the second interview where she would meet with different groups of people. She called the superintendent in advance to ask if she could visit schools and he said, "Well, absolutely." *So, before the interview, he set me up with their human resources director and he took me around to several schools, and I went into classrooms and chatted with students and their teachers. I am glad I had that opportunity.* She found this experience to be very positive, as she was able to learn more about the school environment and to talk with principals, staff and students directly. Then she went to

the interview which turned out to be very informal. *Everybody was sitting in a circle; about a dozen were from my first interview, including the superintendent. I guess it was more a getting-to-know-you session because there was not a set of questions.* Liza described the setting to me as almost funny because the questions did not appear to be planned. *We'd have a little conversation and then I'd have to wait for the next question to be posed and everyone would kind of look around; okay, who is going to ask the next question (laughter).*

A Caucasian woman who had retired from another state was the successful candidate. When the superintendent called, he said, *"You know we had a tough time deciding, but we decided to go with the other person because she had many more years of experience and had been a building principal."* Liza found this comment to be quite revealing because she knows that not having been a building principal may be a factor in getting an assistant superintendent or superintendent's position, even though she and I both know people who do not have this experience.

The Rest of the Story

I worried that not having principal experience might get in Liza's way in landing that perfect job. I began discussing this with her when she blurted out, *My title here has changed from director to assistant superintendent!* I was speechless for a minute or two and tears formed in my eyes because I was so happy for her. She is very deserving! I then realized I was a bit jealous, because I wish my district would do the same for me. I quickly shook off the feeling because this was a moment to be celebrated. Then I assessed how intelligent her superintendent was to have realized Liza's worth. She told me, *My superintendent did not want me to leave. He said, "I do not want you to leave; I want you to stay here. What can I do to make you stay? I do not want to lose you."* It turns out that for Liza and her current district, the promotion was a win-

win situation. Later, she shared with me that the superintendent had come to her, and asked her to pull out of the interview processes. She answered him by saying, *I would not and that I was sorry, but I just couldn't do that.* I thought what a brave woman she is. She did the right thing for her career. I had to inquire whether it was a promotion in name only, because I would even settle for that. Fortunately it was not. The new position, Liza informed me, came with a *significant promotion financially and with extra benefits.* I was curious about the work load and what may have been added onto her “plate.” Liza satisfied my curiosity. *No, in fact what has occurred is we have some assistants in place where I can delegate some of my responsibilities out because it was so huge.* Liza will continue to provide support for all of her existing responsibilities, but she will be in more of a supervisory role than in the past.

Liza also shared that politics did come into play not long after she and the superintendent spoke about the promotion and the restructuring. Since the district had one less director than the prior year, the superintendent asked her what she thought of also making the business manager (a Caucasian male) an assistant superintendent. She knew politically that she needed to agree, especially if the superintendent was to sell her new assignment to the school board which had a very close relationship with the business manager. *So I compromised; I was fine with it. Later I did think though that I have certification and he does not.* However, Liza said she felt more positive realizing that the superintendent had come and spoken to her about the situation rather than just doing it.

Liza discussed with me how she has since been perceived by the other administrators in the district. *I've received a lot of positive feedback and one of them told me, “You know, I'm really proud of you. You've worked hard for this and you deserve it.” I felt supported by all the administrators.* She did add that there was one administrator, who has since retired, who would

have been oppositional, as he was from the “good old boy” system. Fortunately, he was no longer with the district. Liza realized that, *It has helped having the title [providing] leverage in the district.* She also mentioned she has the support of the school board members’ and believes this is in part, because she has lived in the community for most of her life and they all know about the leadership she has provided.

Liza told me that her husband is very proud of her and supports the successes she achieves in her career. *He said, “It should have happened a long time ago, as you are so deserving.”* Her daughters are also elated because they did not want their mom to move from this community; this surprised Liza at first. She explained that her girls were afraid they wouldn’t have a home to come back to as this town is home, not somewhere else. *I had never really thought of it like that before; they wanted to be here where their grandpa and relatives live.* Liza has since visited with her relatives who are quite proud of her and her new title. When the subject of her dad entered the conversation, she discovered how he felt about her educational advancement through others in the family. *Well, my relatives tell me, “We are so proud of what you’ve done; now we really do not want you to move.”* Liza thinks that they are speaking for her father. *Yes, this is the Mexican way, and they tell me for him.* When we discussed what her mom would say if she were alive, I teared up along with Liza. She said, *I think my mom never really understood where I was going, but she would have been right there with me. I think about her and what she would be thinking of me if she were still here.* We agreed that her mom would be extremely proud of her success. I cannot imagine not having my mom, who supports everything I do, with me.

I appreciate what Liza said at the end of our time together, *It’s kind of like a fairy tale (laughter).* *You know, you go through this whole process and you are really stressed and then*

you don't get these positions; then before you know it, it is a happy ending! I would have to agree.

Advice to Aspirants: "I think they have to access a level of self-confidence so they can overcome some of those challenges they are going to be encountering as a Latina superintendent"

Liza believes that there are many attributes that a female superintendent should possess:

Communication is of utmost importance. They must possess strong communication and articulation skills. I think they have to access a level of self-confidence so they can overcome some of those challenges they are going to be encountering as a Latina superintendent. Liza stated that aspirants should not personalize a lot of the biases that they might be encountering in the role. She also discussed the paperwork process, *Start early because there is a lot required in terms of the application process. It is not something you can do overnight, as you have to be able to show yourself through your cover letter.* Liza then continued to give more advice:

Aspirants have to have a realization that they do have to work twice as hard and prove themselves twice as much, but it's worth it in the satisfaction that they will get out of it for the work that they do. They also need to consider the impact that they're going to have in closing that achievement gap, and the role model that they will provide for the community and the schools, the students and families. It's worth it and that's where the heart really is in trying to improve things for the next generation. It needs to happen, and they can do it, but realize that there are a lot of hurdles they'll have to go through, and they do have to work twice as hard, and they have to speak twice as loud to be heard. (sigh) The hurdles are ones of having to earn respect from your colleagues, because, predominantly, the setting is still mostly Caucasian male. The gaining of respect from them is important and the other is when you're working with families. If you're in a school district where you're working with families of poverty and minorities, you also have to develop that trust and the relationship for the fathers of the children to get the support that you need from them to help the student be successful. It all comes back to the students and to helping build those opportunities for them. So, that is the advice I would give.

Conclusion

Liza stressed to me again how important it is to be the right fit for the job, and how nice it is that she "fits" in her district. However, when I asked if she will apply for a superintendent's

position this spring, she answered, *I am not going to actively or aggressively seek a position.* I sensed that if the right position came her way she might just have to take a second look. I mentioned this to her and she said, *Yeah, I might.* She realizes having the title of assistant superintendent will aid her when she seriously seeks once again the superintendency. I advised her to get some experience evaluating principals, as this will also help her when she seeks a superintendent's position, whether or not she becomes a principal. One last thing Liza wanted me to know had to do with her interview with Pioneer School District. She revealed that she received a call from another district wanting her to apply for their assistant superintendent's position. When she asked how the caller got her name, he said, *"The Pace board chairman gave me your name."*

Legacy: "I would want them to say my belief in the educational system is that it's about students, and students come first"

I hope that people would remember me as a person with a strong level of integrity and a strong work ethic. I would want them to say my belief in the educational system is that it's about students, and students come first. She noted that she is not even sure she wants to leave a legacy behind. *I just want to do the work. I want to be the individual who goes above and beyond to get the work done and to help meet the academic needs of kids.*

Norma Garcia: "I Want to Be a Superintendent and Make a Difference in the Lives of Kids"

Introduction

Of all the participants, 50 year old Norma, who was an assistant superintendent for Coronado School District when I first interviewed her, has the most varied experience working in the schools, including the most experience in administration. She started out as an instructional assistant in another district. She has a great sense of humor and is open and candid when she speaks. An assistant superintendent for six years, she was ready to transfer her skills

and abilities to a district of her own. Coronado School District serves approximately 3,000 students and the Hispanic majority makes up 76% of the school population. It is located in a small town of approximately 6,000 people. Norma wished to continue to serve a similar population as a superintendent. Her dream of being a superintendent of her own district (she got the position at Meadow School District) was realized by the time I returned for the second interview, and her desire of serving a similar population also came true as Meadow School District has 74% Hispanic students.

Personal History: “The most important value that my parents, together, instilled in us, is education”

Norma Garcia’s office was a busy one, as her responsibilities were varied in all the programs she oversaw as the assistant superintendent in the Coronado School District. On her table was a stack of files – items, she said that, *I must deal with before I leave tomorrow for a conference*. She called in her administrative assistant with whom she tried to meet daily to help her stay organized and on top of things. As they busied themselves looking through all the items on both Norma’s list and on her assistant’s list, I looked around the office and noticed that there were many pictures of family, certificates, and plaques honoring Norma. After the lists were prioritized, I was prompted to ask Norma about her family. She was very happy to oblige:

I have eleven brothers and sisters, so there are twelve of us in my family. My grandparents were born in Mexico, but my parents were born in the United States. My parents were migrant workers and mom went to sixth grade and my dad went to eighth grade. When they were growing up, and then when they got married, they decided that they were not going to spend their life being migrant workers. They wanted a stable life for their children. My father, with the help of his father, became a farmer. All 12 of us kids graduated from high school. Out of the twelve kids, seven of us have a degree of some sort, and the rest are pretty wealthy, out on their own, without going to school. They have their own businesses and so forth. I had a great childhood, a very loving family, mother and father. Church was a big part of our lives.

The most important value that my parents, together, instilled in us is education. That was one of the reasons why they said they would not continue to move around after they got

married. They wanted to have that stable life. We wouldn't go from school to school like they did and get further and further behind. Education was very important. Family values were very important. When I went to kindergarten the teachers did not allow me to speak Spanish, so I never quite felt like I had a solid foundation in either English or Spanish, and I think that contributed to me being retained in 3rd grade. Most of the Hispanic people in our area were mostly migrant workers so they did not stay. My family was one of the first to stay. I remember being asked, "Now why don't you go to Mexico?" I'd never been to Mexico in my life! I am married and have three children, and two of them are teachers. I have been married for 30 years.

Norma talked about her mother's influence on her life. I could see that her mom was a very important person in her life.

My mother's point of view and what she instilled in us girls, because there were five girls in our family, was that we could do anything that we wanted to do, and that when we married, it's a partnership relationship and it's not the man telling us what we needed to do. To this day, we are all very independent women and all in high level positions. So we knew that anything was possible and that family was very important. Interesting that none of us married a Latino.

This comment caused me to reflect on how glad I am that my mom also helped teach me the value of an education and how to be an independent woman. She always told me that I was special and that I did not need a man to take care of me. She said, "You can take care of yourself." I also did not marry a Latino man.

Norma described her early life, providing an example of what occurred when she arrived home from elementary school:

My mom was a stay-at-home mom. She had to be with all those kids. I would come home, and I'd have all these siblings, and we'd just be excited because we'd play. She'd let us play for probably about an hour. I'd walk into the house and she would be making tortillas for dinner, so you can smell the tortillas. She'd be preparing dinner and it was probably beans and rice and some sort of a meat. She'd ask us how our day went. My dad would not be home. My dad was a farmer and he didn't get home until dinner time. Now, if you were an older sibling, you went right out to work. If you were a younger sibling boy, then you had the opportunity to stay around and play with the girls. Because I have seven brothers and five sisters, the girls' work was the home, and we had a large home, and the boys' work was farming. If we ever went out to help the boys, it was because we wanted to, not because we had to.

When everybody arrived home, we did some homework and then we'd have dinner and then we'd watch a little bit of television. We had a black and white TV. We didn't have a TV for years until my dad brought home this black and white TV. I think that's probably why my family is so important to me, because I have never felt alone. There was always somebody to play with.

I asked Norma to tell me about a defining moment or moments in her life growing up and she shared a couple:

When I was in second grade, my father was involved in a train accident. He was with some men and they had been out and I'm sure they were probably drinking. On their way home there was an accident as the man who was driving thought he could make it across the railroad tracks. The train was coming and my dad tried to get out and when he got out the train hit him and cut his leg off. He almost died. My mom stepped up to the plate at that moment in time because it took my dad a long time to recover from that. As a second grader this was a lot to deal with. First of all we were thankful that he didn't die, but then at some point you say, "Okay get on with your life, dad." We wanted everything to be like it was before. Now as an adult, thinking about somebody losing their leg, he went through everything that he needed to go through. But my mom was very strong during that whole time. I'm not even quite sure what we did for money, and I didn't consider us poor or anything like that because we still had what we needed. So that was a defining moment in my life, just to see my mom and how strong she was during that time. I think this is another factor of why I believe the girls are so strong.

My parents ended up getting a divorce after 25 years of marriage because of what happened to my dad. My mom picked up the pieces, and we went on, and my dad had a very tough time, and alcoholism played a big role in that whole piece. It wasn't good for the kids, and that's when my mom finally said, "I can't live like this any longer." So they were divorced, and it was a sad day in my life because my dad meant a lot to me. Another defining moment for me was when I was growing up. I started dating this boy and I got pregnant, and I had my son between my sophomore and my junior year of high school. He's 33 years old now. That was a defining moment in my life where I still carry that baggage with me of having a child out of wedlock.

Her story reminded me of two defining moments in my life. The first event occurred at high school graduation for my brother and me, when, after our names were announced and we had walked across the stage, my mother turned to my father and asked him for a divorce.

Alcoholism also played a major role in their breakup. The other reflection I had was of the many Latina girls who were pregnant in high school, and I remember thinking they had ruined their

lives, but here was Norma and she did not let having a child at such a young age interrupt her education.

Career and Profession: "I am a very strong and determined woman"

In talking about her career, Norma remembered her educational journeys. She always wanted to be a teacher. Her husband encouraged her to go to college, even though she had two children and another on the way. She did start at a community college but eventually moved the children so that she could complete her college degree at the university.

On my 25th birthday, I cried, and my husband said, "What are you crying about?" I said, "I've always wanted to go to college and be a teacher and I will never get to do that." He encouraged me to start at a community college, and so I went. We did not want to have a babysitter for the new baby so my husband worked swing shifts so he could watch her during the day while I went to school and then I'd be home at the night. After I finished at the community college I moved my children to the university where I completed my degree. After that I taught for nine years and also I worked on my master's degree and my principal's credentials. Pretty soon I was Summer School Director and I was on all of these committees as chair. Then in a different district I ended up as a part-time teacher and a part-time principal assistant. So, I did that for one year and then the next year I became an assistant principal at two different schools. I did that for another two years, which was a very difficult position to do, to be an assistant principal in two different buildings. Then I became a principal in this great school that I loved for three years. We received the Distinguished Title Award and I received the Distinguished Principals Award. I absolutely loved my job, and in my Christmas letter I wrote, My husband says, "I have to go to work every day," I say, "I get go to work every day and I love it."

Norma then shared her experience in applying for the assistant superintendent's position in the same district where she worked as a principal:

When I applied it was a bit of a stressful time. It was the superintendent's first year and he had been our assistant superintendent before he became the superintendent. Anyhow, our levy failed the first time around, which it hadn't failed as long as I can remember, and the available position, therefore, was in limbo because of the levy failure. The superintendent told his board at that time that no matter what, he was going to have somebody in here whether we called it an assistant superintendent or a curriculum director. At that point in my life, I wasn't really concerned about the title so much, but what I failed to understand was along with the title came some wage discrepancy, so we ran the levy again and it passed. Then I was offered the position. When it came time to negotiate for my salary, this is when my eyes were opened as far as the world of

negotiating and who negotiates for you, because the superintendent was negotiating for my position as well as for the principal's.

He came over to talk to me and he said I was going to have to work 60 more days on my contract with only an increase of about \$6,000. I'm thinking to myself, and then I said, "I can't do that," especially when he was still debating whether he was going to call it an assistant superintendent or a curriculum director. So, I thought about it for awhile, talked to a business manager, who told me what he thought would be fair, because he looked at the report of comparable salaries and positions. Then the superintendent offered me the position, and he asked me how much money I wanted to make at that time. And it wasn't any more than he would have made had he stayed in the position as the assistant superintendent. I told him that because I knew how much he made and how much of an increase, [percentage] it was-- about \$10,000 more than I would have been making as a principal, --and it was 60 more days. The superintendent about fell out of his seat when I told him how much I wanted and I said, "But that's how much you would've made in this position." I told him, "I don't have to do this; that's not my heart's desire. My heart's desire is to be with these kids." Then he told me, "Don't push this Board into a corner," and I said, "Well don't push me into a corner because I'll stay here, or I'll go to another district, so don't push me. You asked me how much I thought I needed to be in this position, I'm telling you." I asked for \$79,500; they gave me \$79,400. So, I said, Okay, but not without a long discussion with my husband, and he told me, "Do you think that the superintendent is looking out for your best interest?" I said, "Well, I would hope so." And I actually thought that he had more of the ability to negotiate finances, but I've seen the Board in action and he really doesn't. It really was the principle. What is \$100.00 more? If it had been a male in the position, there would not have been a fight over it. I am the first woman ever in this central office in this district. My superintendent even made a comment to me one time, "that's too close to my salary!"

Norma described the events to move up within the same district. When she switched from the elementary school to the central office, the phone lines were "humming" with conversation about her.

I have a reputation for holding people accountable and I am perceived as very assertive. I do know that the secretaries and the support staff here were a little concerned about me coming to the central office because one of them called my secretary at the time and said, "We're really worried, we're a family up here and we're worried about her coming up here. What can you tell us about Norma?" My secretary said, "The only reason why you should be worried about her is if you're not doing your job. If you do your job, she'll leave you alone, but if you're not doing your job that's when she has a problem with you, and she'll deal with it." There were also some principals a little concerned about me. They also knew I would hold them accountable for making sure our curriculum was aligned and that the curriculum adoptions were being used.

As I observed Norma in meetings with many different administrators and staff, I wondered how she managed so many different programs. It appeared impossible. *In this position I am expected to wear so many hats, and sometimes I feel like I am not really helping anybody so I am trying to get some help.*

She told me about her professional goals, when I asked what she sees herself doing five years from now?

I am applying for a superintendent's position. My hope would be that I would get an interview and get the position. I see myself as a superintendent in this state. I want to specifically work with the Hispanic population. The district where I am applying is approximately 80% Hispanic and 20% White, similar to my current district.

Norma described herself as *a very strong and determined woman*, but also *passionate, caring, and a person with a great sense of humor*. She has high standards for kids and believes that accountability in education is of the utmost importance for the children. *When I feel like there's an injustice, I go after it, or when a kid needs something, I am there to help.* Recently, Norma recalled the day when her former secretary where Norma had been principal called to say, "Jose needs a place to stay and he needs this and that." *I immediately told her that I would be over and that everything would be fine, and that I would take care of things.* Despite her dedication to her work which involves helping the "Joses" in the schools, Norma is bothered by having to prove her worth over and over again in the district. She mentioned two examples: *I feel like I have to "fight" for my pay every year, and then my daughter works in the district and people make comments to her like she is just like me, or she is going to tell on them.*

When I inquired about mentors in her life who have helped her, Norma identified female mentors and her older sister, but her mother preceded the others. Norma stated, *I am what I am today because of my mom. I saw how strong she was every day. She is my number one role model.* She credited her mom not only for her work ethic, but for teaching her about the

importance of children and grandchildren. *The best advice she ever gave me was, "If your husband goes hunting, you go hunting. . . . If your husband bowls, then you bowl."* Norma added, *I have seen my aunts play their traditional roles with their husbands, you know they stay home while their husbands go hunting, so I went hunting for a long time even though my brothers didn't think I should.* Norma thinks her mother emphasized the bowling and hunting examples because she wonders if she could have prevented her husband's terrible train accident had she been with him. Her mom also wanted Norma's family to remain close, rather than evolving into a family where the wife did one thing, while the husband did another.

Norma admitted that the demands of the job have interfered with her family life because of the extended hours it takes to get the job done. Norma described one particular incident:

I had one of my daughters living with me and one night she called me at work and said, "You know mom, one day you are going to look back at this year and you are going to say, man, I hardly talked to her because I was working all of the time, that whole year!" And I said, "It's my job, I have to do my job." I look back at that year and I wasn't hardly ever home and she was going through a rough time and she needed me.

In addition to her job as an assistant superintendent, Norma is also a Latina leader in her community. This role plays out in myriad ways:

It means several things. On a positive note, I see the respect that I probably deserve and get from Latino families. That is probably paramount. The fact that they feel like they're going to get a fair shake with me is important. They say, "Nobody's really ever listened to what I've had to say until you." I've had people come straight to me and bypass the principal and say, "I need your help," and because I want to include the principal, I'll call the principal over. Also being a Latina role model, means that when I say that a child can go to college, a girl can go to college or even a boy can go to college, that I can say that with confidence because I've done it. I see myself as an example. The negative part of it is that in a community that is still, in our political arena (even our board at one point was predominately Caucasian), there can be concerns. When a Hispanic woman comes in, you still have the good old' boy mentality, and I see it changing with our Board changing, but it is still that sense that they don't respect you because you're a Hispanic woman. Not necessarily just because you're Hispanic, but a Hispanic woman.

As I listened to her talk about not getting respect because she is a Hispanic woman, it made me think back to one of my other Latina participants (Mary Ramirez) when she referred to not being able to change her “Hispanicness.” Perhaps Mary coined a new word. Norma reemphasizes that it is about gender, being a *Hispanic woman* . . . because her superintendent is a *Hispanic man*, *and I see the difference in how we are treated and the way people react to him versus me*. With this understanding, she looks forward to having her own district to lead one day soon.

While reflecting on the possibility of getting the superintendent’s job for which she was applying, she stated:

I just mailed off the application. This has inspired me! The number one reason why I would go to Meadow School District is because I have so many things in my mind that I think will make a difference. When I share some of these ideas with my superintendent, he says, “I don’t think we are ready to go there yet.” I want to get into the field and see what the school board, with my ideas and me being the superintendent, can do to make a difference in all students’ lives in my own district.

Norma realizes she has a lot of work ahead of her if she gets the Meadow School District job, a challenge she is looking forward to:

The first thing is that I am going to get a feel for the principals. I think the principals are the key to my success as a superintendent. I will want to mentor them as much as possible, to make sure that they feel supported and they have everything they need to make their schools successful. It is important to have the right people on the right bus. I’ve been looking at some of the concerns that Meadow School District has and it’s some of the same concerns that we went through here. They have an outstanding sports program. To the detriment though, that some people believe this is at the risk of the academic programs in the secondary schools. When I first came here, we rarely talked about scores in reading, math, and curriculum adoptions. The conversation and sharing at school board meetings were about the football team and the players. It was all around sports! Now it’s on a very rare occasion that we talk about sports. Mostly our discussions now are about data, and what the teachers are doing to help students reach standards. The principals present information about what’s happening in their schools. If that’s a concern for Meadow, there needs to be a balance there, and I know I can do it, because that’s what happened here, and now we have balance.

In thinking about being a Latina, and going into a superintendent’s job in Meadow School District, if selected, Norma states:

I don't know too much about the school board members yet, but I know they have one Hispanic woman on the board right now. So that's hopeful to me. I know that they're looking for a Hispanic person. I think that is what they are wanting. They want somebody who knows their concerns about the Hispanic population, and they want a role model for their community. I don't really have any concerns, because I feel very confident in what I'm doing. I think that my six years as an assistant superintendent here have prepared me. I interviewed for that position three years ago, and they said, "What makes you think that you can go in and help us here, especially with the Hispanic population?" I said, "I've been living and breathing it for my entire career. It's my life." We'll see in a year how successful I have been when you come back and research me as a superintendent and see all that I have learned. They want somebody to come in and analyze the numbers and the students' needs and put a comprehensive plan together to help all the students.

When I returned for Norma's second interview for my study, she had indeed become the superintendent of Meadow School District. The interesting thing was that she could have become the superintendent there three years ago when she was first offered the position. She did not accept it at the time because the school board members insisted that she move, and there was no suitable place available. She asked the search consultant at the time (who happens to be the same consultant this time) *"Where do you want me to move to? There is no place to live here."* The consultant told her if she was not willing to move, then they were going to give the job back to the current superintendent as a retire/rehire. He tried three more times to get Norma to change her mind, saying, "Will you move?" *"No, I will not move."* (She lived 30 minutes away). *I cannot believe they can't see the value I would bring to them, just because I cannot move. Then I did not hear from that search consultant again for three more years.*

And then she did when the position reopened. She said it was a little awkward, at first, because she would see the consultant at other events and he acted like he didn't even know her. But, she would walk right up to him each time and shake his hand. *I was not going to let a job define me.* Now here he was again calling Norma, asking her to apply. "Did you know the Meadow School District job was open?" *I told him, "Yes I did."* Then he asked her, "Have you thought about applying?" She responded, *"I thought about it, but I didn't think they would want*

me after what happened three years ago.” Then I find out at the interview that they had already researched me before they talked to the consultant. The consultant told her that the school board members wanted to know if she might be interested. I began thinking that I am doing so many progressive things here right now, but I believe God opens doors and says what you need to do, and so I applied for the job.

Challenges and Successes of the Superintendent Interview Process: “I answered their questions and it felt like we had been old friends”

As I drove to the Meadow School District, it felt like it was in the middle of nowhere. I played a game of “miss the tumbleweeds!” It was a windy November day and the tumbleweeds kept getting in my way so I was forced to dodge them. Then I laughed because off to my left were three chickens walking on the side of the road. This was definitely a rural area. As I edged closer to the town, I observed that this community was an agricultural community. I saw many different types of fruit warehouses in the area. It appeared to me to be a peaceful, small town. The elementary and middle school sit atop a hill off the main street in a park-like setting on several acres that looks more like a college campus than a small-town district. This was my second visit to Meadow School District. I visited last spring when I observed Norma and one other of my participants (Mary Ramirez) experience the interview process for the superintendency of this district. When I was here last, I did not notice the one building that doesn’t fit in with the scenery. It was a portable metal building where the administrative office of the superintendent is located. Although it was painted maroon to match the accent colors used on the schools surrounding it, the metal exterior and rectangle-box shape made it seem like an afterthought of a larger school construction project. I wondered if this was the case, or if it was intentionally planned to send a message to the public of the district’s priorities.

I was directly involved in observing the first interviews only for this study and I will share my perceptions and add Norma's views about the process from her perspective. This was an excellent opportunity to be able to observe "real" interviews for the superintendent position of Meadow School District.

Meadow School District

After Norma's first interview ended and she walked out of the room, one board member commented that he had heard she was difficult to work with, and that they had better be cautious and check her out more thoroughly. A different board member said, "She may be too educated for us" (This is curious because Norma does not have a doctorate). But when the only candidate with a doctorate, a white male, completed his interview, I observed that no one mentioned that he might be too educated. Interestingly, these kinds of comments were not made after the male candidates left. In fact, the board members said only positive things about them immediately following the interviews. I felt somewhat better about the fairness when the candidates' strengths and concerns were listed on a t-chart, and the comments about each candidate, on both sides of the chart, were shared with the whole group.

I was interested in the interview questions, since they often reveal information about the person asking the question. The questions were: "Describe for us the core values that you will bring to our district if you are selected as our next superintendent. What will you stand for? What won't you stand for? What are the values that will define you as superintendent?" One candidate answered, "I don't play too many games." He spoke about turmoil in his current district, and stated he wanted to leave because he would have to be both a principal and a superintendent next year. Another male candidate mentioned that he was putting up with horrific situations in his district, indicating that he could deal with anything. The last male candidate brought up the

importance of integrity, trust, and having passion toward people. Mary stressed the need for the superintendent to care for families, expect excellence from children, and that she must not accept excuses that children can't succeed. Mary went on, all kids can achieve as long as they are provided opportunities. Norma started by stating that her core values are centered on families, that education is the key, and high academic programs should be provided for all students. She also mentioned that she would not stand for not meeting the needs of all students, and what is good for some is good for all. The last question asked was, "It's very important to us that our superintendent be a visible, active member of Meadow School District community. If selected as our next superintendent, tell us how you would plan to fulfill this expectation?" The underlying question, I heard, was, "are you willing to move to the district and live among us in the community?" This did not slip by any of the candidates. All of them said something like, "I think I know what the question is really asking and yes, I will move here," with the exception of one male candidate who stated he would not be moving to the community; he would rather be on the road traveling 30 miles each day than have his wife need to commute the same distance to her job. It surprised me that, after he left the room, it was no longer a requirement that the superintendent live in the community. In fact, the committee learned that a superintendent from some years ago had never lived there, yet he stayed connected with the district. An earlier requirement suddenly was deemed not so important.

Norma described for me what she heard from the consultant after the interview. He told her that the school board members thought she was too matter-of-fact, that her personality did not come through. This revelation about Norma reminded me that the committee had said the same thing about Mary after she left the room. It is interesting to note that this characterization was said only about the two Latinas. Norma recalls: *I was very nervous, and the way that they*

were all set up (the group observing to the side and the school board members in front of her), I was concerned that my personality didn't come through. Norma added that it was very intimidating when she walked in and all of those people were in the room. She could not remember the consultant preparing her for that. *It kind of reminded me of a boxing ring where there were spectators and the light was on me, that kind of a deal.* She felt prepared, however, and just answered the questions quickly as they were asked. She clearly remembered the question about moving to the district. *Of course I told them I would move to the community, but for some reason this surprised the consultant. I was determined that I was not going to let that stop me this time.*

When the three finalists were announced and invited to return to spend a day in the community, two of the three were the participants from this study, and the third was the male candidate I mentioned above who said he would not live in the community. When I was asked by the search consultant to rank the five candidates after all the interviews, I had ranked Norma as number one, Mary as number two, and this male as number five. Therefore, when I heard he was a finalist, I was surprised and disappointed. I believe it hit me hard because he fit the prototype of a superintendent as a married, white male. He was tall and good-looking; the male principals were impressed with all he knew about sports and how he would fit in with the district. I thought to myself, "Wow, another good old boy!" Curiously, he was the only one who said he would not live in the district, and prior to the interviews, the board members had said the person chosen must live in the community.

When the three finalists returned for the day, their time was spent in meetings with the current superintendent (a white male), and with principals and staff, as well as in a community meeting. In addition, there was another formal board interview and dinner with board members.

The final questions were about: (1) leadership style; (2) program development; (3) fiscal management; (4) community relationships; and (5) board-superintendent relationships. Since I had access to the questions for my study, I read through them and reflected on the strengths of each of the finalists. I felt assured that one of the Latinas would be the next superintendent, as these questions, and the answers they would give, would make them shine.

After Norma received the call from the consultant that she was a finalist, she said, *“Great and I’m ready.” I would get to have an all-day affair (laughter) with them and dinner in the evening. He also said they were saving the best for last, and told me it was okay to joke with them.*

Norma started her day-long process meeting with the superintendent (a white male) and his assistants. Norma had concerns about the district reserves going down considerably each year, and asked for more information. The superintendent told her it wasn’t a problem and they had just passed a levy that was going to take care of it, *but later I learned the levy did not take care of it. In fact, I am starting my year here with a deficit.* The day continued with lunch with the superintendent. *I could clearly see that we were very different, especially our leadership style. He was very hands-off and didn’t know what was going on in buildings.* This worried Norma as she is very hands-on and is in buildings constantly. Following lunch, she met with the principals and the athletic coach. She ended up learning later that this group had already selected the white male they wanted for their next superintendent. *The thing that they wanted to talk about the most was football; the conversation was about these passes they sell to families.* When she asked if the committee could continue to sell them so inexpensively, they did not want to discuss it. (Later when Norma became the superintendent and learned of the budget deficit, the family passes went from a \$10.00 price to a \$40.00 price.) While still with the committee, Norma

wanted to discuss something other than the passes. She told me that she had to maneuver the conversation so the group would focus on instruction. They, then, wanted to know what she expected of them. *I wouldn't expect you to be in your office when I stop by. I'm not one to "dance" around issues; you will know exactly where I stand and I will always go directly to you.* As Norma and I further reflected on the differences between her and the past superintendent, she was still concerned that the principals would view her as having her nose into everything and wanting to be in the know. She told the group, *Your business is my business (laughter), and I do expect you to keep me informed; I do not like surprises. I want to be prepared just like you're going to be prepared when I know things.* Norma found it interesting that the school board members wanted to meet with the principals' group following her interview, so the principals could share their opinions about Norma with them. During this time she toured the facilities with the superintendent.

Norma felt good about her interview with the teachers. She was able to answer their questions about literacy, grants, and teaching and learning. She was quite familiar with the reading program they had in place, and could speak knowledgeably. After time spent with the teachers, Norma ran into a parent who introduced herself. Norma remembered having received a card three years prior from this parent who had revealed how disappointed she was that Norma did not take the job. The parent told her, "You were head and shoulders above everyone else, and I am praying that you get this job." When one of the school board members saw Norma with this parent, she asked Norma if she knew this person. Norma indicated that she did not, and the board member cautioned, "I'm not telling you who to be friends with, but I would stay clear of her." Norma wasn't sure what prompted this cautionary tale from the board member.

The second interview with the board members went much better. She summed up the interview by saying, *I answered their questions and it felt like we had been old friends. It was that comfortable for me.* When Norma noted the time, she mentioned to the board members that she needed to slip outside to see if her husband had arrived. As she did so she turned to them and said, *While I'm gone you may talk among yourselves, but you may not talk about me! I started laughing and then they laughed too.* When she came back in they said, "Well, here's the deal. We're probably not even supposed to be talking to you about this, but we're afraid if we offer you the position, you are not going to take it because of the pay." She had already been told by the search consultant that she might have to take a cut in pay so this was not a surprise. Norma replied, *Well I don't know what you want me to tell you.* The board members responded, "Clearly, you know your stuff, and you're the kind of person we want here." *Then they were curious about how long I would stay, and I said, "Well, how long will you have me? It goes both ways."* The board members confessed that they had been talking with people in the district where she was employed and told Norma, "Many say they absolutely love you and think you are the best thing that ever happened to them, and then some people can't wait for you to leave." *"Yes, I know that's true. I am where I am because of who I am."* She followed this up with some examples of holding people accountable and the reality that sometimes her decisions are not liked, but she does what she believes is best for kids. Norma also focused on the importance of having an open door policy and how it is all about kids. Her priority is based on student learning and student success.

At dinner, her husband joined the group and, Norma reports, that they had a great time. At the end of dinner, one of the board members said to her, "You know, it's like we have known each other for a long time." The community forum was next on the agenda.

Everyone got a chuckle at the forum because, as Norma spoke, a phone kept ringing every few minutes. Finally Norma walked over to where her husband was sitting and dug out her phone to turn it off. She had not realized it was hers because it was brand new, and she did not recognize the ring. Later she found out her siblings were calling to find out how her day was going. Norma had no unusual or personal questions to report to me with the exception of one aggressive person who pressured Norma to speak in Spanish. *She wanted me to have a whole conversation with her in Spanish and I offered to do so with her after the forum.* The superintendent search consultant called the next day with the good news, “You did a great job and the board was very impressed with you.” She had to ask, “*What about the principals? I do not think I was their first pick.*” He told me that the white male principal candidate was their pick, that he was more like what they were used to. He then reminded her, “It is the board who selects; the principals only recommend.” There was, however, one more formality, a site visit. The school board members did visit her site and were impressed with Norma’s ability to manage all of her duties. The consultant told Norma that the salary offer he was making on behalf of the school board was a very generous one, and offered her what she would make the following year in her current role as assistant superintendent. *I told him that I would need to think about it. I know he thought I would just take it.* Norma made a counter offer requesting additional vacation days, and it was accepted.

Obviously, Norma felt much better at her second interview than she did with her initial one, as she was more able to be herself and let them get to know her better. She felt like she *clicked* with most everyone and she was positive she would be the next superintendent of Meadow School District. She did not submit any comments or questions that she thought were inappropriate at the time we spoke. I reflected on why Norma received the nod for the job, while

Mary did not, even though they were comparable competitors for the same position. Norma did come across as more confident than Mary in the initial interview. Their credentials, knowledge and skills, however, were similar and made them equally suitable candidates for the job. The biggest difference between them was that Norma has assistant superintendent experience and has been an administrator for six more years than Mary. As much confidence as I had in both of these women, I knew Norma's role as assistant superintendent would work in her favor, and make the transition to superintendent much smoother.

The Rest of the Story

The Board of Directors of Meadow School District have stated that they expect Norma to move into the school district within a year of her hire date, but, as of yet, there is not a home available for Norma to move into, so she continues to commute 30 minutes to and from work each day. As Norma and I returned from lunch to continue her interview, one of her secretaries had put flyers of million dollar homes for sale on her desk. I peeked at them and told her, "Hey, look here, there are some homes you can buy." She grabbed them out of my hands and laughed, *Yeah, but none are in this town!*

Norma is happy with her superintendent's position, especially after getting over the shock that their budget was in the "red." It has been difficult to start a new job and immediately start saying, "No," to purchasing requests, but she has had to. She felt the board members had been upfront with her about there being some problems in the district, and that her skills were going to help her work on these issues. Norma did not think she got the job because she was Hispanic or because she was a woman. She believed she secured the job because it was a match, and being Latina was a bonus! Considering her own background she also felt she would be able to relate to the Hispanic community and families who lived in poverty. *I can help people ensure their*

children receive a good education just like my mom did for us. I can help others understand that poor people can also achieve, that they can learn how to read, that they can do it.

When I inquired about what kinds of tasks she was working on, the budget rose to the top, but there were also personnel issues, special program reports, district improvement meetings and more. She did tell me that her high school principal, a white male was making her earn her money. *He has said to me on several occasions, "I hope you are not going to fire me!"* Norma's administrative assistant does a pulse check for Norma and informed her that the principals have made huge shifts already in their thinking and in their behavior. As she recalls the many times the principal has said it and for various reasons, I roll my eyes and remember a high school principal at one of Mary's interviews asking her something similar. Norma continues, *and he always calls me "boss!" I've had to work on shifting the culture here to one of focusing on schools improving, and not schools and staff focusing on athletics.*

As she reflected on how much she has accomplished already and what the job means to her, Norma immediately thinks about the classrooms where all the learning is taking place. *It has meant so much to me that I get to be in classrooms and get to know the teachers. They are not used to the superintendent in their classrooms, or accustomed to someone who knows the curriculum, but they seem to appreciate me.* She has appreciated the learning experiences and knowing that the decisions stop at her desk, a huge responsibility. The one factor about the job that she does not like is, that because of the hours and the drive, she has less time for her family.

I think the ultimate compliment that Norma received recently was from her prior district superintendent who has asked to attend one of her school board meetings with a couple of his school board members. He was very pleased that their state assessment scores in their district went up and attributed it to Norma's leadership, so now he wants to come and see what her

school board meetings focus on. He is sure she will duplicate the success from Coronado School District at Meadow School District.

As Norma pondered what advice to give to others, she said to me, *It is so nice to have the support of the school board, all of their support. They have apologized over and over again and said, "We feel bad you have so many messes to clean up here."* It doesn't appear that she minds. In fact to me she looks like she is enjoying herself. I wonder what her Christmas letter will say this year? Will it continue to read, and "I get to go to work every day and love it!"?

Advice to Aspirants: "I would definitely encourage women who had the skills to go after the position"

In discussing what attributes female superintendents need to possess to be successful, Norma shared that *they need to be knowledgeable, good listeners and communicators, and set examples for their staff.* Norma has much experience to contribute, and she offers some sound advice for women seeking their first superintendency:

For women seeking the superintendency, I personally believe that, because I've had the privilege of being an assistant principal, principal, and assistant superintendent, all of this experience has been valuable for me. I've had the opportunity to be in a situation where I don't necessarily call the shots, but I get to observe the process. I am privy to and help make those decisions. It is important to get plenty of experience first and then be well-prepared to do the job. Another thing is that you need to have the support of your spouse, or somebody that can help you, because it's lonely up here. They also need to find a good mentor.

Norma also recommended job shadowing an assistant superintendent or a superintendent to make sure it is what you want to pursue, and most importantly, *Do your homework. Be sure to research the district thoroughly so you are not blind-sided by anything.* I agree with Norma's advice, especially about making an attempt to find a mentor whom you can job shadow.

Conclusion

As I drove away from Meadow School District, I did so smiling because we have added another wonderful, intelligent, dynamic Latina to the ranks of superintendent. Meadow School District is in good hands, and Norma will be a person I'll call on as a mentor as I seek out my first superintendency.

Legacy: "When she was here, things changed for the better for all students"

When I asked Norma about the legacy she hopes she will be remembered by, she mentioned that it's all about kids. What I hope people would say is: *"When she was here, things changed for the better for all students."* I also hope that teachers and staff would say and know that bottom line; *I'm here for kids and their academic achievement grew under my leadership.*

Epilogue

All four of these Latinas are proud of the success their students experience under their leadership and the continued support they receive from their communities. Norma looks forward to many years as the superintendent of Meadow School District, while Mary will remain in the role of assistant superintendent of Kellogg School District until she decides to seek the superintendency once again. Liza is contemplating whether she will consider leaving her current district now that she is an assistant superintendent, as she may just stay put for a while, and Stella is definitely ready for a new challenge and will seek the position of superintendency in the near future.

These four Latinas have enriched my life by allowing me to study them, but more than anything I am grateful for the relationships we have built. I feel like I can call them friends and know that if in the future they need me, I will be here for them, and they for me.

CHAPTER 5

LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This in-depth, qualitative portraiture study explored the lives and experiences of four Latinas who aspired to become superintendents and addressed the following questions: Who are these aspiring Latina superintendents? Why do they aspire to the superintendency? What successes and challenges have they experienced in this quest, and how do they interpret these experiences? And, what meaning do they make of becoming a Latina superintendent? The portraits of the four participants are presented in Chapter 4, interwoven with my own story. I approached the interpretation of these portraits as a series of lessons that I learned as a researcher, lessons that I hope can be productively shared with other educators and especially with Latinas in education.

I learned that the participants in the study, including myself, have similar backgrounds, education and life experiences. We also encountered similar challenges as we each acted on our aspiration of becoming a superintendent. Fortunately, we also have experienced positive influences that have made a difference in helping us achieve success. In addition, many of my own life-lessons were positively reaffirmed through the stories of these four Latina aspirants. At times, when I did not think I could complete this study, I would reread their portraits, and that was enough to motivate me, because their stories deserve to be told and will make a difference for others. I was fortunate to not only interview these Latinas, but to have the opportunity to “job shadow” all of them. Through this process, I was able to see firsthand how each of the study participants conducts herself on the job, as well as the positive differences they are making in the lives of children and adults. To this end, we speak with one voice as I sum up our shared

experience around the themes: (a) experiences resulting from discrimination, racism or sexism (b) family and work ethic; (c) drive, determination and perseverance; (d) commitment; (e) mentors and supporters; and (f) preparation and love of learning. I also include our advice to other aspirants, as well as suggestions for how aspirants might prepare for the interview process.

Throughout the study it was apparent that within our educational system there are winners and losers; this is an accepted phenomenon in our culture. In order to work successfully within these parameters, the Latina often finds herself in survival mode, struggling against traditional hierarchical structures that limit who has access to leadership positions and that tend to screen out those who are “different.” The Latina, therefore, must cultivate and hold on to support structures that allow her to move forward in a challenging professional arena. I use the metaphor of a traditional, colonial house to illustrate the major themes which represent the support structures that help the participants succeed. Imagine a colonial American home with four large columns supporting a massive roof. The overall structure is the “American Dream” and the home of “winners” in the American meritocratic system. (See Figure 1.) For the Latina who aspires to the “American Dream,” it is a home in which the foundation is built around



Figure 1

family and a strong work ethic. Our parents served as models, working hard to achieve their dream of life in America. As their daughters, as Latinas, we too learned to work hard, inheriting a work ethic that would sustain us. Supporting our American home are four large pillars built upon the foundation our families provided. The pillars are (a) the

determination that allowed us to remain strong and did not allow others to stop us; (b) our *commitment* to the families, students and communities we serve; (c) the *mentors* who provided critical support; and (d) *preparation* and a love of learning that was essential to successful advancement. This “house” provided the support we needed and made it possible for us not to allow unfair and biased practices to dissuade us from achieving our goals. Rather, every discriminatory act we have experienced has strengthened our resolve and desire to advance our careers. We have transformed the traditional “American Dream” into a dream built on Latino cultural standards. Our achievement stands on the pillars and foundation of our home. The fact that we have successfully enacted this transformation lends hope to all who would follow our path.

In the sections that follow, the major themes are discussed as well as implications and recommendations. The chapter ends with my personal thoughts.

Experiences of Discrimination, Racism, or Sexism

It is ironic that the participants and myself may have continued to pursue advancement as the result of discriminatory actions that occurred in our lives. In addition, it is sad that discrimination exists in educational systems, and is not something imposed on just adults, but our children experience it also. I believe that at various stages in our lives we all have experienced what is referred to by some researchers as “white privilege” (Johnson, 1997, Kendall, 2006).

When Johnson (1997) speaks about this privilege:

Regardless of which group we’re talking about, privilege generally allows people to assume a certain level of acceptance, inclusion, and respect in the world, to operate within a relatively wide comfort zone. Privilege increases the odds of having things your own way, of being able to set the agenda in a social situation and determine the rules and standards and how they’re applied. Privilege grants the cultural authority to make judgments stick. It allows people to define reality and to have prevailing definition of reality fit their experience. Privilege means being able to decide who gets taken seriously, who receives attention, who is accountable to whom for what. And it grants a

presumption of superiority and social permission to act on that presumption without having to worry about being challenged. To have privilege is to be allowed to move through your life without being marked in ways that identify you as an outsider, as exceptional or “other” to be excluded, or to be included but always with conditions. (p. 33-34)

Latinas live with this understanding of white privilege every day. We are not “white.” We will never receive a race privilege card because our skin color is noticeably brown. Our color is seen immediately, and I believe this often causes other, more privileged individuals to have preconceived notions about us before they even know who we are. Johnson (1997) further discusses privilege as a paradox:

Individuals are the ones who experience privilege or the lack of it, but individuals aren’t what is actually privileged. Instead, privilege is defined in relation to a group or social category. In other words, race privilege is more about *white* people than it is about white *people* When it comes to privilege, then, it doesn’t matter who we really are. What matters is who other people *think* we are, which to say, the social categories they put us in. (pp. 34-35)

This white privilege dehumanizes whites as perpetrators and identifies Latinos and other minorities as victims, leading to the oppression of individuals and groups.

This is an oppression that I and the participants in this study have experienced at various points in time. I often reflect back to a counselor who tried to dissuade me from applying for college admission, stating that I should “. . . keep [my] job washing dishes at the nursing home.” Recall how Mary was the victim of several sexist comments and questions during the interview process: “You know, you are so small, but I bet you carry a big whip, don’t you?” Or, “How do you feel about being the boss to men [principals]?” Mary was also asked if she was going to have children. When she responded, “No,” she was asked the question a second time. “Well, do you plan on having any?” One must ask if these types of questions would be asked of a man. Imagine a member of a school board asking a male candidate, “You know you are a small man, but I bet you carry a big whip, don’t you?” Or “How do you feel about being the boss to women

[principals]?” And, “Are you and your wife planning on having any children?” The participants and I are fortunate that, rather than dissuading us, these types of negative experiences served to reinforce our belief that voices of Latina women are needed in the superintendency if this type of overt discrimination is to be stopped.

During interviews in several districts, board members also voiced concerns about the Latinas’ ability to be fair to non-minority members of the district. Board members asked participants questions such as: “With our large Hispanic population, how will you make sure that people do not perceive you as favoring one group over another?” And, “How will you work with the Hispanic community, and will you be fair and not be biased?”

It is also interesting to note that at times even positive attributes were used as ammunition to question participants’ competency. An example of this occurred when a board member commented that Norma was “. . . too educated,” even though Norma does not have a doctoral degree. However, when Norma’s male counterpart, who had a doctoral degree, was questioned, there was no mention that he might be “. . . too educated.” During this same interview cycle in which Norma and Mary were the only females being interviewed, board members commented that the women’s personalities did not stand out, and as a result, the Board felt they were not able to know them as individuals. In contrast, none of the three Caucasian male candidates suffered similar comments, although the feeling/tone of their interviews was similar to that of the Latina candidates. In spite of the fact that the Latina women are exceptionally well-spoken and engaging, members of the Board perceived them to be less personable than each of the men. In both examples, the Latina’s positive qualities were either subverted or misconstrued, thereby diminishing their rank order as a candidate for the position.

In our hearts, I and each of the participants in the study believe that we will always have to work harder to prove ourselves to a school board comprised primarily of white men. We have accepted that this is the current reality of our chosen profession. However, rather than allowing this reality to dissuade our future actions, we choose to use these types of discriminatory actions as a catalyst that supports our continued professional growth.

Family and Work Ethic

All of the participants in this study, including myself, had under-educated parents who worked primarily in agriculture. Growing up under these conditions was difficult in many ways, but our family's work ethic helped "ground" us and prepare us for the challenges we encountered as we grew into our professional lives. This familial work ethic was strong for all of us and aided in helping us seek better opportunities for ourselves and our own families. Considering the facts that none of us had parents who were educated past the eighth grade and that all of our parents came to the Northwest to work in the fields, it is extraordinary that we all have become successful Latina administrators. What made a significant difference in our lives is that our families were supportive of the goals that we pursued. Our families imposed very few roadblocks to our desired paths. In fact, only Stella's parents and my own father did not initially support plans to go to college. However, even they had a change of heart when they realized the importance of education to our futures. They began to understand our need for support and offered their encouragement.

The family connection is very important to all of us, and, to this day, we each maintain a close bond with our families. We all have had extremely close relationships with our mothers, who always believed in us. This connection seems to have been a critical influence for each of us. And for those of us whose mothers are still alive, we have continued a close relationship into

adulthood. In addition, our spouses' support and encouragement has been vital, as we each pursued the needed university course work to get advanced degrees and certifications as teachers, principals, program managers, and superintendents. Our spouses were all willing to help with the household responsibilities and take care of our children while we pursued our goals. Sometimes this support meant the spouse had to work a different shift so he could be available at needed times. As our responsibilities in administration continued to grow, supportive spouses were critical to our success. It is also interesting to note that each of our spouses were willing to move to follow our careers. We each have stayed married to our spouse, who helped advance our careers. Two of us will finish our doctorates this year, which serves as a testament to the support we have received from our spouses and families.

Perhaps our greatest success is that we have each been able to stop a familial cycle of women not finishing high school. This cycle is especially significant for those of us whose parents were born in Mexico. It is extraordinary that we all have been successful in our efforts, considering 50% of Latino students do not graduate from high school, let alone continue to college. My mother, as well as Norma's and Mary's, made a point to ensure we knew our independence was a gift, and that we needed to be able to take care of ourselves. As a result, we centered our attention on bettering ourselves and furthering our careers, rather than focusing on being good wives. Although some of us struggled with the machismo that is often a part of Latino culture, we learned to not allow machismo to drive us, or to expect our husbands to be the head of the household who would take care of everything for us. We all feel we have "broken the mold" for ourselves and our children. Our children, including our daughters, know they will attend college immediately after high school; there is no other option. For example, Norma's and Liza's daughters are all either in college or have already graduated from college and are

professionals. Stella's and my children are still young, but they believe that all children attend university after high school. This belief is quite a contrast to our having grown up in a culture in which it was commonplace for pregnant Latinas to attend high school, and then to discontinue their education and focus on motherhood. Norma was the exception to the rule, because even though she was pregnant in high school, she did not allow this cultural standard to keep her from completing high school. Considering we grew up immersed in this cultural setting and in poverty, we could have allowed this cycle of low expectations to be repeated. However, all of our parents wanted more for us, and we wanted more for ourselves.

Drive, Determination, Perseverance

Each of us had a strong drive to look to the future and to become more educated. Even as young, new teachers, we felt that we were destined to positively influence the educational system. This sense of purpose provided the drive and determination needed to keep us going to school, often while working full-time jobs and caring for young children at home.

Our perseverance was tested at times when we did not have full support from our peers, families, or coworkers. Mary experienced two situations that, ironically, made her determination to succeed that much stronger. First, there was the boy who called her a "wetback" because she was out working in the fields. Then, there was the superintendent for whom she worked who did not believe she would make a good superintendent. Mary was determined to prove them both wrong, and as a result both situations helped her grow. Norma never felt 100% support from her superintendent, because each year when her salary had to be renegotiated, they went back and forth over the amount she was being paid. Norma knew she was worth the money. Norma wanted to be able to show her superintendent that she could manage her own district and that she had the capacity to extend her success as an assistant superintendent into the superintendent role

in a new district. Obviously, Norma succeeded when, later, her former superintendent asked to visit one of Norma's school board meetings to learn from her practice as superintendent! For Liza, it was her determination to continue interviewing for superintendent positions in other districts that prompted her superintendent to offer her the position of assistant superintendent. Liza had proved her worth, and her superintendent was concerned that he not lose her to another district. Liza's drive and determination allowed her to tell him, "No" when he asked her not to continue seeking superintendent positions.

An additional positive outcome of our drive and determination is that we eventually found ourselves in the position to mentor others, both professionally and personally. We especially enjoy the opportunity to talk with students and demonstrate to them that we were able to overcome challenges, and that they too may overcome challenges. However, a challenge that we all have experienced and continue to confront is the need to prove we are capable, competent, and skilled administrators. We have each addressed this challenge by "working twice as hard" as those around us. The constant need to prove our worth appears to be a fact of life for Latina women in this study, and a price we are willing to pay for success.

We also have shared the determination that we would not be dissuaded from seeking superintendentcies because we had not followed the traditional path to the superintendency; e.g., the high school principalship as a stepping stone. None of us have followed this traditional path. Only Stella has had secondary school experience in middle school; the rest of us have elementary teaching and/or elementary principal experience. Liza is the only participant who has never been a principal. Mary was upset when her superintendent thought that districts would not consider her application because she had only six years total administrative experience. Mary refused to

listen to him and became even more determined in her job search. We are each determined to make our own paths to the superintendency.

Commitment

We all feel it is very important to give back to our communities. One way to accomplish this is to continue to serve Latino students and families. Even if this assistance means serving in districts that may be in trouble financially or in those that need to be “fixed,” all of us are up to the challenge. The challenge we may not be up for is working in a dysfunctional district, as it appeared was the case in the Foster School District, in which Mary interviewed for the superintendent position (although it is important to note that Mary would have considered the position, had she been offered a three-year contract and been treated with respect and dignity). The concern with this possibility is that, had Mary accepted the interim position, it would have been for one year only and not considered a “permanent” position. Considering that Mary had been “attacked” on several fronts during the interview, it was evident that courtesy and a professional approach were not a part of the district culture.

Sometimes Latinas need first to leave their communities in order to gain the necessary experience to later return and serve as a superintendent. Occasionally, aspirants are afforded the opportunity to remain in their district, although staying also can pose challenges for Latinas. Both Mary and I had to leave our Latino communities to gain the experience necessary to become superintendents. Both of us serve in school districts with approximately a 5% Latino population, a very different context from our home communities. However, we both hope our future superintendent positions will include high populations of Latino children. Stella, Liza and Norma have all continued to serve in predominately Latino school districts. When Norma moved from principal to assistant superintendent, she stayed in the same district. Liza also remained

with the same district when she moved from the director's position to assistant superintendent. Liza continues in her old district, while Norma eventually moved on to her current position as superintendent in her new district. It is not uncommon to move up the ranks in the same district as a principal, then to a central office position. However, to receive a promotion to assistant superintendent is significant, because it is not common practice. Instead, most individuals must change districts to be employed as an assistant superintendent or superintendent.

We all are committed to children and willing to do whatever is needed to make sure all children are helped to reach their potential. At times this means that our passion for children may be misconstrued. We may be perceived as overly aggressive when we hold others accountable for their work. Having said this, none of us hesitates to insist on needed improvements, because our first priority is student achievement rather than maintaining staff friendships. All of us have specific strengths in the areas of instruction, curriculum and assessment, which help us guide the work in this era of school reform. We work in partnership with our staff and believe in empowering others in order to do the work. Our leadership styles are adaptive and collaborative, and we believe everyone must work together for student success.

As Mary and Norma were going through the interview process and had spent time with the superintendent of Meadow School District, they soon realized that he was not knowledgeable about instruction. Additionally, his priorities did not include spending time in the schools, focusing on teaching and learning. In contrast, I believe that our expertise in these areas will continue to bolster our success as instructional leaders in our respective districts. In fact, as a pattern of male superintendent disconnectedness with teaching and learning appeared across multiple sites, it caused me to question whether women tend to be more proficient in these areas.

Mentors and Supporters

Mentoring and the support of others have played a significant role in our ability to pursue advanced degrees in education, as well as careers in educational administration. Four of us had teachers in elementary or high school who were strong influences in our lives, and with whom we remain in contact as friends and colleagues. All of us were supported by individuals who affirmed that we were special and had talent, and that we should use these skills to help others. Our mentors were friends, teachers, professors, principals, assistant superintendents, and superintendents. The significant point is that all of us did have someone who served in this role. I believe that having a mentor was instrumental to our success because when someone would denigrate us there was always a mentor who would encourage us. It is interesting to note that for most of us this mentor was not a Latina or a woman of color.

Preparation and Love of Learning

All of us have prepared over the last three to five years to apply for superintendent positions; we all have superintendent credentials. We are extremely confident in our skills and knowledge and feel prepared to assume the superintendency. We have been advised by professors and superintendent consultants to apply in small size districts, but I find this limiting, as a small district may not be the best “fit” for all of us. For example, I currently supervise twelve schools in my role as an executive director of teaching and learning services, which means I oversee 6,000 students. I do not see myself starting out in a district of one to three schools and 100 to 1,300 students. I would not be happy or be the right “fit” for the job. As a result, I may have to wait longer for the “right” opening, a wait I am willing to make. Clearly, the four participants in this study were fine with starting as a superintendent in a small district, because they applied for and accepted the position with full knowledge of the demographics.

Was this settling for a position that did not fit their capabilities? Norma is now a superintendent in a district with only three schools and 1,300 students enrolled. In one way, I wish that these strong women would have been encouraged to look beyond small districts, as I know that our white male counterparts are not all being told to start in a small district. There is precedence that supports women to consider this option because in this state, there is now a Latina who is in her second year as a successful superintendent in a district of over 2,000 students.

In their narratives, all of my participants talked about their yearning for learning. None were satisfied with the status quo, and all wanted to be challenged and continuously grow professionally. For example, Mary felt she had done all she could as a principal and needed a job with more influence and the ability to have a positive impact on children; I understood this as I felt the same way when I was a principal. Stella feels she has fulfilled her role as a principal and now needs more challenges in her life. Liza views her role as assistant superintendent as an opportunity to lead administrators as they all learn and grow together. However, as Liza meets the challenges of her new position, she knows there will be a superintendent's position in her future that will provide yet another opportunity for learning. Norma is currently experiencing this continuum of learning that comes with her first superintendency.

Implications and Recommendations

There is a dearth of Latinas in public school administration, especially in the superintendency. Why is this so, when Latinos continue to be the fastest growing segment of the population? Why does this inequity exist? Are there too many challenges and barriers facing Latinas? Should the educational system be doing more to promote Latinas to the superintendency? What would need to happen to increase the number of Latinas in leadership positions and to facilitate change?

I believe all educational systems at all levels need to acknowledge that institutional sexism and racism exists in our schools, in central administration, and in our colleges and universities. Until this acknowledgement occurs, I do not believe the inequities in regard to Latinas will be addressed or will change. White privilege is pervasive in our educational systems. However, the voices that are heard decrying white privilege are all too often only those of people of color.

I noticed that none of the participants directly mentioned “white privilege,” although they provided examples that prove its existence. Is it because we are just so accustomed to white privilege that we do not give it much thought? Or have we just accepted that this is the way things are for us? Have we become so accustomed to covert and overt racism and discrimination that we have learned to insulate ourselves from it, that we tolerate it or ignore it when it happens and move on? I believe the latter to be true.

Perhaps as a result of the study, I am increasingly aware of how pervasive white privilege is in my everyday work encounters and in my life. I do not believe that Latinas have all of the same options and opportunities allowed a white male or female, and that is the reason we find ourselves continually needing to prove our worth. I believe that often what the majority population sees first is the fact that I am Latina. Second, they see that I am female. And only then do individuals consider whether or not I am competent. This type of judgment has no place in the professional workplace, and most certainly should not exist in the educational system of a diverse, democratic society! Therefore, we must continue to examine the ways in which institutional racism limits opportunities for women of color. I wondered why, with the single exception of Mary, none of the participants discussed this topic at any length.

Having system-wide conversations about race are difficult and uncomfortable for most people, but until these conversations begin, the status quo will continue to be the norm and white males will continue to dominate in the superintendency. In order for change to occur, school system leaders must start looking to their Latina students as future leaders. Students must be nurtured in their aspirations of going to college and possibly becoming teachers and school leaders in K-12 schools. Currently, these types of conversations are not commonplace for Latinas. Further, educators must begin an analysis of existing data that reveals how minority students are often tracked into low-performing programs. This subtle “racial profiling” of students begins at an early age and must be stopped so that minority students are afforded the same opportunities as their Caucasian counterparts. At the adult and professional level, awareness means reexamining hiring practices. Does the percentage of staff of color reflect the student demographics in a school district? If not, why not? An action plan needs to be created to address each of these issues throughout the educational system.

Educational institutions must begin mentoring Latinas as future teachers, principals, central office directors, assistant superintendents and superintendents. As Latinas enter the teaching profession, they should be assigned a mentor to assist them through the early years of the profession in order to sustain their growth and nurture their leadership potential. This is especially true in the areas where women often do not receive sufficient authentic experiences; e.g., levy and bond work, budgets, and participation in superintendent regional meetings that are primarily attended by white men. As Latinas are encouraged to pursue principal credentials and superintendent credentials they must be mentored by other professionals. Having a Latina role model and mentor is critical to support the realization that Latinas can do these very important jobs. These mentors could show aspiring Latinas the “ropes,” answer their questions, share the

sacrifices they have made to get to the position they are in, and discuss what to expect as they prepare for interviews and the job search.

In regard to preparation programs, as universities prepare future superintendents, they should purposely and intentionally plan for part of the program to include a mentorship program. Universities should have these mentors available during the school year for the students, so that the aspirants see people who look like them in these leadership roles. This is especially important for women and minorities. Even more important would be to have a female professor of color teaching part of the superintendent's cohort courses. None of us had a female professor of color throughout our course work. We also never had a female minority superintendent, let alone a Latina visit and/or speak to our classes. And yet, it is important to hear different voices and learn different perspectives. Universities need to be very intentional in creating partnerships with the school districts and promoting higher education for minority students while they are still in the K-12 system.

It is important that institutions acknowledge and take responsibility for learning about white privilege. As Johnson (1997) stated,

In the end, taking responsibility doesn't have to involve guilt and blame It simply means acknowledging an obligation to make a contribution to finding a way out of the trouble we're all in, and to find constructive ways to act on that obligation. (p. 168)

Educational systems must begin the process of educating all staff about the existence and detrimental effects of "white privilege" so that primarily Caucasian staffs begin to understand racism and its effects on people of color. Educating people about one another, our values and beliefs, is an important tool to help us diversify our work force. Why is it that we must have some winners and some losers? Why is it that some must be oppressed while others advance? We need to work together to change this trend for future generations. We need white people to

not be defensive and to help make a commitment to equity, to help change the status quo. We all need to work together to end oppression, but it takes a degree of courage that many individuals do not possess. Johnson (1997) argues that each individual has the capacity to change institutionalized racism:

With each strand of the knot of privilege that we help to work loose and unravel, we don't act simply for ourselves, we join a process of creative resistance to oppression that's been unfolding for thousands of years. We become part of the long tradition of people who have dared to make a difference—to look at things as they are, to imagine something better, and to plant seeds of change in themselves, in others, and in the world. (p.171)

Our Advice to Other Aspirants

The words of advice we would give to aspirants searching for that perfect superintendency are pretty simple. We would tell them, “Go for it,” and “Just do it!” We would tell them to not let anyone get in their way and to seek out others to help them. We feel it is important to be prepared and do your homework before applying in a school district. It is evident in this study that connections with university professors and search consultants are helpful throughout the search process. As an example, many of the search consultants were willing to provide feedback to participants about how they did in the interview and how they might improve in future interviews. One supportive search consultant even told his client that he would not want her to take the job even if it were offered. This is an important role for the consultant, to help make sure the fit is right for both the district and the aspirant.

Strong communication skills are also critical traits to develop as an aspirant. It is important to be a good listener, to be personable, and to be an excellent communicator. It is also helpful to know in advance what to expect if you do get an interview for a superintendent's position, and that most likely it will be a day-long interview with many different individuals from across the school community involved. Perhaps the most surprising part of this process for

a couple of the participants was their first interview when 15 to 20 people were involved in the process as observers and to provide feedback to the school board members. If the aspirant isn't told in advance that there will be additional people in the interview room, it can cause additional anxiety for the applicant.

It is unfortunate, but necessary, to note that Latina aspirants should not be surprised by racist or gendered comments and questions. If Latinas anticipate these situations, they will be better equipped to handle them when they occur. Due to her petite stature, race and gender, Mary endured a number of racist and sexist comments, most of which were subtle and/or asked in private. In spite of this, Mary's high level of perseverance and determination supported her in spite of the negative comments. She has never let inappropriate remarks or actions stop her from pursuing her dreams. In fact, all of us have maintained a positive attitude, even after being exposed to blatant or subtle acts of discrimination.

The Interview process

I wish there were some way that we could mentor others and share with them all of the "hidden rules" embedded in the interview process. Unfortunately, sometimes the rules change, even while the game is being played. For example, the job description may state that the successful candidate must live in the district. However, if the school board members find an individual that they believe to be the right fit for the position, and he chooses to not live in the district, then this apparent requirement may suddenly disappear as a requirement. In addition, candidates need to know that school board members may look subconsciously for superintendents that look like them, thereby giving the white male applicant an advantage.

It is also important to note that search consultants do influence which candidates are interviewed or not. Their role is often one of screening and deciding who gets an interview. They

could easily be referred to as the “gatekeepers.” Therefore, if a Latina aspirant does not have a solid network or know someone who can put in a good word for her, she may never make it past the “gate” to demonstrate what she knows.

All participants talked about the “fit” of the position and the comfort they felt when they knew the job was “right.” Norma mentioned it felt like the school board members were “family” when she thought the fit was right. Most of us would say, “Listen to your gut.” Mary felt things were not right at Foster School District early in the process; she knew that she should not accept the job if it were offered.

Policy makers, the school board members who are hiring superintendents, must be better trained in interview procedures. It is important to understand what questions are inappropriate or in some cases are simply illegal. Board members need to see women of color as equally competent and qualified as they do white male applicants. The school board members’ perceptions of what a superintendent should look like or beliefs in Latina stereotypes can far too often impede the Latina aspirant from being hired.

Recommendations for Future Research

Having learned more about aspiring Latina superintendents through this study and having discovered through my review of the literature that there is little available research on Latinas, I recommend the following for future research:

1. An examination of how the Latina (female) aspirant’s experience of attaining the superintendency would compare to a Latino (male) aspirant’s experience. Does gender make a difference and does the combination of race and gender make their experiences similar or different?

2. A study of the Latina stereotypes that exist in the workplace in order to find out if these stereotypes are factors that impede Latinas' ability to advance in educational administration.
3. A more in-depth look at the factors that contribute to the success of Latinas from migrant backgrounds in regard to education and careers.
4. A continued study of these Latina aspirants through the whole process of the job "hunt" and the first full year or more in the superintendent position.
5. A comparative study of the experiences of Cuban, Puerto Rican or other Hispanic women whose national origin is other than Mexico.
6. A study of all minority female superintendents in the United States in regard to school district context and tenure in their roles.
7. A study of Latina superintendents who started their careers in districts with problems; e.g., financial difficulties, or perceived "trouble" with the Latino school population. Was the Latina superintendent able to make positive changes over time and did the superintendent stay in this district?

Concluding Thoughts

It did not matter whether the participants I studied were principals or were in central office roles; they all wanted what is best for children and were willing to do whatever it took to make sure children were achieving under their leadership. This is the moral imperative for all educators; nothing is as important to us as our need to ensure that each child is learning.

This portraiture study honors and celebrates these four Latinas for all they have accomplished in their lifetimes and for all they have to offer to others. The stories of these women demonstrate to other Latinas that they also can achieve and reach the top ranks of school

administration. Their successes provide future generations with hope as they see Latinas' dreams becoming reality. My experience with these women has changed my outlook for the future, as they taught me that hard work and perseverance pays off, as we do have the ability to influence future generations.

The Rest of the Story

It is time to address the rest of my story, and to share my vision for change. How will I contribute to society? I will continue to give to the schools and children I serve on a daily basis by supporting their teaching and learning. I will be a role model to all who grant me the privilege to do so. Some day in my future, I hope to return to the home where I was born and raised and give back to the community where I began my education. I would love to be the first Latina superintendent in my community; I would like an opportunity to demonstrate the lessons I have learned. I would like to serve as a leader and model for the children and staff. The completion of this dissertation and a doctoral degree is one more step on the way to realizing this dream.

As I reflect on how far I have come, I am at times astounded. To illustrate this point, I would like to conclude with a poem I wrote about my youth and a quote that serves to remind us of the possibilities.

Just Who Do You Think You Are?

They say my language is bad,
that I am only good for working in the fields.
My ma with only a third grade education,
my pa with sixth grade under his belt.
Just who do you think you are?

They say, what's that you are eating?
A burrito, a tortilla filled with frijoles!
You must go sit over there
at the corner table by yourself.
Just who do you think you are?

They say I am different,
I look around and see they are right.
Take a scrub brush to wash away the brown
but cannot see through the blood and tears.
Just who do you think you are?

They say keep the job at the nursing home
washing dishes, you'll go far.
College wasn't made for people like you,
two percent, college bound. Who you kidding?
Just who do you think you are?

They say, hum, got into college anyhow,
want to become a bilingual teacher, but how?
After all, we took away your language
when you were just a tot.
Just who do you think you are?

They say if you insist, we'll let you into college
but only on probation.
Don't forget you don't look like the rest of us
shabby clothes, no money and no car.
Just who do you think you are?

It is not too late to claim
other unsung, unknown, hidden, and
forgotten Latina leaders.

~Sylvia Mendez-Morse (2000, p. 59)

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APPENDIX A

CHARACTERISTICS OF SELECTED LATINA ASPIRANTS

	Parkview	Sunnyvale	Viewcrest	Coronado
Personal Characteristics	Mary Ramirez	Stella Valverde	Liza Barrajas	Norma Garcia
Age of Aspirant (Years)	36	45	49	50
Race	Latina	Latina	Latina	Latina
Years as Administrator	6	9	6	12
Current Position	Elem. Principal	Elem. Principal	Central Office Director	Asst. Supt.
Other Administrative Positions Held	Asst. Principal Summer School Principal			Elem. Principal Summer Adjunct Prof.
Teaching Experience	Elementary Adjunct-ESL	Elementary Middle School Migrant Summer School	Middle School Special Ed.	Elementary
Superintendent Credential	Yes	Yes	In Process	Yes
Highest Degree Held	Masters (Working on Ed.D.)	Masters	Masters	Masters
Married	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Children	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Grandchildren	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

APPENDIX B

Table 1:

Characteristics of School Districts in Which Participants Worked in 2005-2006**

	Parkview Mary Ramirez	Sunnyvale Stella Valverde	Viewcrest Liza Barrajas	Coronado Norma Garcia
Approximate Student Enrollment	3000-4000	14,000-15,000	3000-4000	3000-4000
Grade Levels	K-12	K-12	K-12	K-12
Student Population				
American Indian	24%	2 %	1%	0.5 %
Asian	2%	1%	1%	0.5%
Black	1%	3%	1%	1%
Hispanic	65%	58%	81%	76%
White	8%	36%	16%	22%
Special Programs				
Free or Reduced Price Meals	90%	72%	79%	76%
Special Education	12%	13%	13%	9.5%
Transitional Bilingual	29%	28%	24%	38%
Migrant	23%	0.0%**	0.0%**	20%

*Pseudonyms are used to identify districts.

** Data retrieved from state database

***0.0% does not appear to be correct, but this is how the data are posted.

APPENDIX C

Table 2:

*Percentage of Students Achieving a “Passing” Score on the State Assessment in Districts in Which Participants worked in 2005-2006***

	Parkview	Sunnyvale	Viewcrest	Coronado
	Mary Ramirez	Stella Valverde	Liza Barrajas	Norma Garcia
<hr/> 4th Grade <hr/>				
Reading	59%	66%	65%	63%
Math	37%	39%	34%	31%
Writing	41%	50%	52%	33%
<hr/> 7th Grade <hr/>				
Reading	46%	56%	53%	42%
Math	26%	35%	30%	26%
Writing	21%	42%	53%	30%
<hr/> 10th Grade <hr/>				
Reading	55%	50%	65%	58%
Math	21%	25%	29%	34%
Writing	47%	44%	58%	5%

*Pseudonyms are used to identify districts.

**Data retrieved from state database are from the school year 2004-2005

***0.0% does not appear to be correct, but this is how the data are posted.

APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Date, 2006

«NAME»
«TITLE»
«ADDRESS»
«CITY», «STATE» «ZIP»

Dear «TITLE». «LASTNAME»,

My name is Irene Gonzales of the Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling Psychology at Washington State University. As I discussed with you through e-mail and phone communication, I am a doctoral student studying aspiring Latina female superintendents. I am working on my dissertation and need to conduct interviews and field observations about aspiring female superintendents. It is my hope that you will consent to being one of my participants in my dissertation.

The study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Washington State University. I am requesting your permission to observe and interview you. There will be three interviews conducted; each could take up to two hours. Tapes of the interview will be kept digitally on my laptop computer in my home office and then transcribed for analyzing purposes. Only my chairperson and I will have access to these materials. All study materials will be destroyed three years after completion of the study. Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from it at any time. There is not any anticipated risk of embarrassment or harm as a result of your participation in the interview or observations. Your identity will remain confidential. You will not be identified, nor will your comments be connected to you, in this study.

Your participation is greatly appreciated. I will be happy to answer any questions you might have about the project at any time. You may also contact my instructor and chairperson, Dr. Gail Furman at 509-335-8412 or gfurman@wsu.edu. If you have questions or concerns regarding your rights as a participant you may contact the WSU Institutional Review Board at (509) 335-9661.

Printed name of researcher

Signature of researcher

Date

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research.

Printed name of participant

Signature of participant

Date

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Aspiring Female Superintendents Interview Guide

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Topics of Inquiry

1. The person's thoughts and feelings about aspiring to the superintendent's position.
2. The person's thoughts and feelings about hopes, dreams and challenges of reaching their goal of becoming a superintendent someday.
3. The person's thoughts and feelings about what attributes those females who have actually become superintendents possess?

Question Guide:

Learn about the person's life history.

1. Tell me about yourself? Where did you grow up? How were you raised? I am interested in your family background.
2. Tell me about your parents? Their background and their education?
3. What values did they instill in you? As a parent, did you ever hear yourself speaking their words?
4. What about your siblings, tell me about them and their education.
5. Let's say you are in fourth grade and you have just come home from school. Tell me what you hear, smell, what is the home environment like? What would I see?
6. Tell me about defining moments in your life growing up, a celebratory one and a challenging one.

Learn about their experiences.

1. Talk to me about how you came to your current position. Start with graduation from college to present.
 - background/path taken
 - academic preparation
 - mentor/support people, who encouraged you
 - stories that made an impact

2. Talk to me about your professional goals? What do you see yourself doing five years from now? Share with me stories about the nature of your work.

(Try to get information on each)

- a. About their superintendent's internship
 - b. Activities they performed
 - c. Challenges they see to becoming a superintendent
3. You've completed your superintendent's credential, talk to me about that experience and what experiences you have had that has prepared you to be a superintendent?
 4. Tell me about any mentors in your professional life that have helped you?
 5. Who are your role models and why are they your role models?
 6. Tell me about defining moments in your career, a celebratory one and a challenging one.

Have the person reflect on the meaning of their life history and their experiences.

1. Tell me what it means to you to be a Latina leader in your community?
2. Given what you have said about your life history and what you have shared about your current role. What meaning does this have for you as you look to become a superintendent?
3. How has all of this inspired you to reach your next goal, tell me about your thoughts and feelings, hopes and dreams of becoming a superintendent?
 - a. Stories about how her history and current experiences have helped her reach this point in her life
 - b. Future possibilities - so what is next for you
4. As you are aspiring to become a superintendent, what challenges do you feel you have to overcome?
5. Tell me what attributes you think female superintendents must possess to be successful?
6. You have a lot to share. What advice would you give other women seeking the superintendency? What advice would you give women who have yet to start working towards their superintendent's credential?
 - Interview process
 - How to prepare
 - What is involved
7. Are you currently seeking a superintendent's position? If not right now, are you going to?

8. Someday you will leave your current position, what legacy do you hope you leave?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share that I have not asked, any additional insights knowing I am studying aspiring Latina female superintendents?
10. What can you tell me about you personally? Are you married? What does your husband do? What about his education? Do you have children? Tell me about them and their education.
11. What do you do for fun? What do you do to take care of yourself?