

Learning from the Experiences and Development of Latina School Leaders

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Testimonios are narrative accounts from individuals seeking to reveal and speak truth to struggles associated with marginality, exploitation, or poverty (Beverley, 2008). The objective of testimonio “is to bring to light a wrong, a point of view, or an urgent call for action. Thus, in this manner, the testimonio is different from the qualitative method of in-depth interviewing, oral history narration, prose, or spoken word. The testimonio is intentional and political” (Beverley, 2008, p. 525). Within academia and the field of education, specifically, “scholars are increasingly taking up testimonio as a pedagogical, methodological, and activist approach to social justice that transgresses traditional paradigms...” (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012, p. 363).

It is in this tradition that we explored the professional experiences of four Latina¹ school leaders in the U.S. The school leaders were current or former school principals and/or assistant principals at the time of the study, with three residing in Texas and one in California. We asked one guiding question: What are Latina school leaders’ professional experiences like, both positive and negative, given the intersectionality of their social identities? In doing so, we acknowledge the varying positionalities of Latina school leaders given their individual backgrounds, histories, and geographical contexts, while considering how their professional experiences are shaped by the educational system in which they work; a system that inequitably distributes opportunities and power. Additionally, as Latina scholars with experience in public school settings, we engaged in “this type of testimonio scholarship” by actively positioning ourselves as allies to the four Latinas in our study (Delgado, et al., 2012, p. 365). We center their

¹ Hispanic, Latina/o, and Latino are used interchangeably in accordance with the literature cited to refer to individuals of Latin descent living in the U.S. (i.e., Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, etc.). The authors also use Latinx, when possible, as a gender inclusive term for this same panethnic group; Latina is used for females of Latin descent, exclusively.

voices and experiences to purposefully disrupt and expand our field's understanding of the kinds of knowledge that are deemed legitimate and worthy of study. Through testimonio we reveal the rich distinct and at times common experiences and systemic challenges faced by the four Latina school leaders, without the intent of essentializing what it means to be a Latina school leader.

These testimonios are critical to consider within the larger body of work that has found that the ethnic and linguistic identities of public school leaders matter and that decreasing the ethnic and linguistic demographic discrepancies between the public school student and workforce populations would serve to improve students' academic and social-emotional experiences (Hernandez & Murakami, 2016a; Murakami, Valle, & Méndez-Morse, 2013; Author, & colleagues, 2015, 2018; Sánchez, Thornton, & Usinger, 2009). More specifically, the testimonios provide greater insight and support for what Hernandez and Murakami (2016a) refer to as the "Latina/o leadership imperative" (p. 12), or the need to purposefully cultivate a pipeline of Latinx administrators given that they are more likely to be attuned to the academic needs of and inequities faced by Latinx students given their shared backgrounds (Author and colleagues, 2015, 2018; Crawford & Fuller, 2017; Elizondo, 2005; Magdaleno, 2006; Méndez-Morse, 2004; Murakami, Hernandez, Méndez-Morse, & Byrne-Jimenez, 2015; Pedroza & Méndez-Morse, 2016; Shah, 2009). In 2005, retired superintendent and executive director of the California Latino Superintendents Association, Fernando Elizondo, argued for the same investment suggesting that the key to serving the growing Latinx student population in the country was "More bilingual teachers and administrators...", which "can positively affect the teaching and learning of Latino children in addressing the linguistic diversity and competencies of English language learners" (p. 22).

Since Elizondo's statement, the size of the Hispanic student population in U.S. public schools has only continued to increase, growing 16% between 2009 and 2014, with Hispanics now comprising 26.8% of all public school students (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2018). Additionally, as of fall 2014, a majority (3.7 million) of the 4.5 million English Language Learners (ELLs) in public schools identified as Hispanic and indicated Spanish as their home language (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2018). The majority of ELLs resided in California (1,390,316), Texas (772,843), Florida (252,172), New York (186,694) and Illinois (209,959) (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2018). In Texas, where three Latina school leaders in this study reside, Hispanic students comprise 52.4% of the public school population (Texas Education Agency, 2018). In contrast, only 24.4% of all public school principals in Texas are Latinx and 16.6%, or 1,342, are Latinas (Texas Education Agency PEIMS data, 2018). Nationwide, the number of Latinx public school principals is proportionally smaller, with only 6.8% of the 89,810 public school principals in the U.S. identifying as Hispanic as of 2011-12 (Bitterman, Goldring, & Gray, 2013). The number of Latina principals nationwide cannot be confirmed since national statistics for principals are not readily disaggregated by race/ethnicity and gender in combination.

Documented Assets and Challenges faced by Latina School Leaders

Just as Latinxs have historically been marginalized in education, scholarship on Latinx school leaders, and Latinas in particular, has historically been limited and primarily existed in the margins within our field. What we do know about Latina school leaders' professional experiences and trajectories is based on a growing number of published articles and a handful of unpublished dissertations, primarily from Latinx and critical scholars. Publications from Frank Hernandez, Elizabeth Murakami, Sylvia Méndez-Morse and Monica Byrne-Jimenez's National

Latino Leadership Project (NLLP), in particular, have contributed significantly to this body of knowledge. In the recent book based on the project, *Brown-eyed leaders of the sun: A portrait of Latina/o educational leaders* (Hernandez & Murakami, 2016a), the chapter devoted to Latina school leaders highlighted how their strong values with regards to family and community are assets that significantly shape how they interact with parents and families, the academic programs they develop for students, the teachers they hire, and the professional development they offer staff. Latina leaders in their study spoke of their roles as advocates for the community and as role models, emphasizing the link between their success and that of students.

In a more in-depth analysis of one Latina's experiences as an urban school leader, Hernandez and Murakami (2016b) expanded on Latinas' professional identity formation concluding, "Latinas/os do not assume racial identity as stagnant; rather they consider a fluid intersectionality of experiences that constantly change based on one's contextual social experiences and their identity development as professionals" (p. 3). Considering the intersectionality of race and gender among Latinxs, they found that the Latina school leader's race "played a large role in her identity as a principal" (p. 10). She experienced social isolation amongst mostly all white administrative meetings, struggled with the need to act white, and developed a critical race consciousness as part of her professional identity; findings that echo some of the experiences of other women of color school leaders (Enomoto, Gardiner, & Grogan, 2000; Jean-Marie, 2013). Hernandez and Murakami (2016b) also suggested that the practice of regularly placing Latinx leaders in high poverty and highly diverse school settings can potentially limit Latinx leaders' opportunities for advancement and releases those in power from the responsibility of equally distributing the charge of educating diverse students. This suggests

that Latina leaders' prevalent positions in schools with large populations of students of color can be a double-edged sword.

Latinas' gravitation toward collectivistic culture—focused on social responsibility and the well-being of the group—versus the dominant individualistic U.S. culture—prioritizing individual fulfillment and choice, has also resulted in workplace struggles for some (Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). Gonzales, Ulloa, and Muñoz's (2016) analysis of the testimonios of two Latina school leaders who opened a charter school in a predominantly Latinx neighborhood in Detroit revealed how the Latina leaders were stymied in their attempts to operate the school based in a more indigenous model of school leadership that represented their Mayan roots. The Latina leaders attempted to build communal relationships and “disrupt the rigid boundaries of traditional school practice,” (p. 34) yet the “charter authorizer did not want to see a circular model they wanted to see a linear model; a hierarchy of leadership or what is referred to as an organizational leadership chart. This is not the indigenous way” (p. 34). Consequently, the Latina leaders' charter was not renewed because they refused to purchase the charter authorizer's mandated curriculum. The authorizer also ostracized “their use of emotion as inappropriate to the board room. These gendered perspectives have been found to marginalize Latina leaders by demanding uniformity and conformity with the stylistic preferences of their white male counterparts” (Gonzales et al., 2016, p. 37), suggesting that Latina school leaders seeking to establish more community-based models of schooling can find themselves at odds with traditional, white, patriarchal systems of educational leadership.

Some of the most significant findings in relevant unpublished dissertation studies reiterate the significant role of Latina leaders' cultural and familial values and linguistic abilities

as strengths in forging a sense of community among those they serve, as well as the importance of having supportive family and access to mentoring (Bagula, 2016; Martinez, 2014; Morales, 2014; Palacio, 2013, Pimienta, 2014; Ramsey, 2013; Reyes, 2015; Ruiz-Williams, 2015; Santiago, 2009). Holding high expectations for self and others and maintaining a commitment to social justice and equity were also prevalent themes. Concurrently, some Latinas also faced continued challenges related to age, gender, and race in the workplace, and despite having support from families, tensions in balancing roles and aspirations as wives and mothers were also evident. The latter findings reflect those of Murakami-Ramalho's (2008) who suggested the need to develop Latinas' "female-specific leadership competencies" through mentorship and role modeling (p. 193). This way, "Latinas in dual-earning couples' arrangements can attain personal and professional fulfillment when they are prepared for leadership competencies that include a satisfying compromise between their female leadership roles at home and in the workforce" (p. 194).

Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality is a useful theoretical framework for understanding how multiple social identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and disability intersect at the micro level of individual experience to reflect interlocking systems of privilege and oppression (ie, racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism) at the macro social structural level (Bowleg, 2012).

Intersectionality also recognizes the limitations of utilizing gender as a unified construct and seeks to recognize "that for many women of color, their feminist efforts are simultaneously embedded and woven into their efforts against racism, classism, and other threats to their access to equal opportunities and social justice" (Samuels, 2008, p. 5).

Emerging in the 1980's with the work of Black feminists, Crenshaw (1991, 1989) was the first to write about the concept to discuss how Black women were often left out of white feminist and antiracist discourses due to their intersecting identities as both females and people of color; accounting for their experiencing political and structural inequalities. Since then, “intersectionality has proved to be a productive concept that has been deployed in disciplines such as history, sociology, literature, philosophy, and anthropology as well as in feminist studies, ethnic studies, queer studies, and legal studies” (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 787). However, this framework remains under-utilized in the field of educational leadership. Although there are a few instances in which intersectionality has been used to examine the experiences of women of color leaders including Asian American women (Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017), Black women (Reed, 2012), and Latina women leaders; the latter often when integrated within the context of larger critical frameworks such as critical race theory and Latina/o critical race theory (Hernandez & Murakami, 2016b; Hernandez, Murakami, & Cerecer, 2014).

In this study, intersectionality is utilized to analyze and understand Latina school leaders' multiple social identities and the role that such identities play in their professional lives as school leaders within the larger context of educational politics and systemic inequities (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). As “intersectionality is inextricably linked to an analysis of power,” the framework provided a means to move from analyzing the data in single, discrete categories and into a more fluid space of interlocking identities, while also interrogating issues of power, inequality, and subordination within the multiple contexts and systems the Latina school leaders occupied (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013, p. 797). In this way, examining the day-to-day professional lives of the four Latina school leaders through an intersectionality framework can

provide a clearer picture of their experiences in order to inform ways to recruit, prepare, and sustain Latina school leaders and address systemic inequities that marginalize them.

Methods

This study builds on the tradition of utilizing testimonio as a methodological tool within academic scholarship to transmit and learn from the cultural knowledge, experiences and stories of marginalized communities that have and continue to be silenced (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012). As Blackmer Reyes and Curry Rodríguez (2012) suggest, “testimonio allows the narrator to show an experience that is not only liberating in the process of telling but also political in its production of awareness to listeners and reader alike” (p. 527). “Testimonio [also] challenges objectivity by situating the individual in communion with a collective experience marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance,” which provides for “new understandings about how marginalized communities build solidarity and respond to and resist dominant culture, laws, and policies that perpetuate inequity” (Delgado Bernal, et al., 2012, p. 363).

Some of the most notable examples of Latina testimonios can be found in Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s anthology, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (2015), Anzaldúa’s subsequent anthology *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives of Feminists of Color* (1990), and the Latina Feminist Group’s *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* (2001). These texts serve to reveal the complexity and subordination associated with the Latina identity in the U.S.; revealing within group distinctions and commonalities in struggles and experiences that can serve as points of coalition and relationship building between Latinas and with other women of color. As the Latina Feminist Group suggests, this work is critical “...to move beyond essentialism, which

assumes a common Latina experience. Latinas must be placed in their varied histories, illustrating their positions within intersecting systems of power” (p. 4).

For this study, we gathered the testimonios of four Latina school leaders through individual interviews to purposefully reveal participants’ unique and shared experiences with marginality and oppression, as well as successes, within their professional roles given their intersecting social identities, varying geographical contexts, and histories. The questions that were posed to participants to guide them in the storytelling of their professional journeys and experiences were purposefully couched to reveal such instances.

The Latina Leaders

The four Latina school leaders in this study were all current or former school principals and assistant principals. All participants self-identified as Latinas, three of Mexican descent and three in Texas. Participants were not explicitly asked about their race, although reference to how they racially identified or phenotypical descriptions of themselves did emerge organically in some testimonios. Participants were also not explicitly asked about their nativity, sexual orientation, relationship status, religious or spiritual beliefs, or whether they were mothers/caregivers of children, although this also emerged organically for some. The Latinas ranged in age from their mid-30’s to their 50’s, with all having at least 10 years of experience in the field of education. Additional information about each Latina, identified by their pseudonym, is listed in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Data Collection

A team of five Latina researchers (two professors, one doctoral student, at the time the study was conducted, and two doctoral alumni) from a four-year doctoral granting university in Texas collected the data for this study. The team conceptualized the guiding questions for the interviews, which centered on gathering a brief history of participants' educational and professional backgrounds, and then perceptions and stories of how their cultural, linguistic, and gendered identities as Latinas shaped their career trajectories, experiences as school leaders, leadership styles, and how they enacted agency in their schools, if at all. Additional questions focused on critical moments in their administrative careers that they felt were particularly shaped by their being a Latina leader, stories or truths they felt needed to be heard regarding Latina school leaders, and suggestions for recruiting and retaining more Latina school leaders.

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling (Creswell, 2013), drawing on the research team's professional and social networks across the country based on set criterion: being a current or former Latina school leader in K-12 settings in the U.S. As some participants were located in different cities and states than the researchers, two interviews were conducted over the phone and two in person. All were audio recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

Three of the original research team members (the two professors and the doctoral student who has since graduated) analyzed the data and wrote the findings for this paper. A thematic analysis (Riessman, 2004), commonly used with oral narratives of personal experience, was utilized while keeping the tenets of *testimonio* in mind; a tool to “express marginalization resulting from race, gender, and sexuality” (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012, p. 528). Analysis began with a thorough reading of transcripts followed by open coding, in which we

each individually utilized a Microsoft Word document to outline codes with supporting text. We used the same coding procedure, which we discussed and reviewed prior to the analysis process.

Coding documents were then uploaded on Google Drive and reviewed during an online Google Hangout meeting. During the meeting, we created a combined list of codes (a total of 22) and discussed each code in depth and began to identify commonalities across testimonios that highlighted the notion of intersectionality. In this process, the 22 codes were organized under seven overarching themes. Findings for this paper reflect four themes we deemed most significant: confronting gender roles and expectations of motherhood, the criticality of mentorship, confronting and addressing racism and sexism, and harnessing bilingualism to empower self and others.

Positionality of Authors

In our roles as “outside” allies to the Latina testimonialistas, we share our positionalities in relation to this work (Delgado Bernal, et al., 2012, p. 365). The first author is Mexican American/Chicana/Latina who is originally from the South Texas border. As a former bilingual teacher and school counselor, she worked and continues to work closely with Latina school leaders through research and practice, recognizing the systemic barriers they confront. The second author is of Mexican descent from Central Texas and identifies as Tejana/Latina. She formerly taught at a bilingual middle school and is the daughter of a longtime public school teacher. Her master’s thesis was on two-way immersion programs. Consequently, she is an advocate of public schools, equitable school funding, and research based dual language instruction. The third author identifies as an American-Mexican female from the Rio Grande Valley border region of South Texas where 98% of all students are of Mexican descent. Having

taught five years of high school science in two mostly Latinx, lower socioeconomic status schools, she understands the critical role of intersectionality in Latina school leadership and its profound effects in the lives of children, families, and communities.

Testimonios

The four Latina school leaders in this study recounted their professional journeys through testimonios that centered on how the intersectionality of their personal identities (primarily race, gender, and linguistic abilities, although other identity markers such as age, class, nativity and generational status in the country were noted) shaped their professional experiences and trajectories; revealing inequitable and systemic power dynamics. Findings are structured to align with the methodological approach where larger, more powerful and detailed portions of one Latina leader's testimonio is presented for each theme. Yet, multiple issues relevant to more than one theme are often reflected within individual testimonios because of the complex, interconnected, and layered nature of participants' storied lives.

Confronting Gender Roles and Expectations of Motherhood

As a former assistant principal who was now working in a district level position, Hilda began her testimonio sharing how she was born in San Antonio, Texas but raised in Mexico, only to return to the U.S. at 21 to pursue a career and eventually become an educator. This provided the context for discussing how her relationship with her husband had changed over the years while becoming a school leader and how she was now conflicted about pursuing motherhood.

...before (the masters in educational leadership), I couldn't see how people could be racist or treat people different. If you tell me I don't like you, I would understand, but not because of how you look or who you are. So, that starts to make a little more sense. I

was reluctant when (professor) was saying that. Because I was experiencing it in Mexico by gender, that I knew; and the favoritism when you are family or not, compadre, comadre. That's what I was exposed to a lot. Because in Mexico it is about how you dress, what you are showing. [That impacts] the way that they treat you. So those three things, but not—and also by color I guess, I have to say. Because even in my own home my grandma was very racist. My sister was always la flaquita de oro (the thin golden one) and I would always be the gordita de plata (the fat silver one). I would not pay too much attention [to that] until now. The difference is obvious, but I guess I don't know how I didn't let that put me down. So, I continue to be pushing. But my grandma was always saying that, and always saying, "You better, necesitas mejorar la raza, so do not go and get married to someone ugly, someone darker than you. You always have to better the race." And then I realized I was oppressed also not only by these things that your family tells you...But then I married my husband [who is white]. I think I realize now that I was kind of pressured a little bit to comply with being the good girl, Catholic girl, but at that moment I think I was feeling alone. All these people trying to set you up, and I think he needed somebody as well. So, we got married, and he is a great support, extremely great support. But now I notice he is very different, extremely, [regarding] the laws about immigrants and all of that...

I guess right now my relationship has suffered a lot because of the time [I spend working] and because I guess our views are different. I am working for the cause and he is not; my husband, he is very different. [I got married when I was] 23. We have been together twelve years now. So, he's noticing a lot, [telling me] "you have changed a lot." And I guess he was hoping I would be more like the Mexican girl with the traditional

family. He has told me that “your views have changed, your values as a family have changed.” Well, not everything is black or white, you know. He told me “even the way that you carry yourself.” And I am like, “yeah, I carry myself with more confidence.” He said, “you sometimes kind of seem like a badass.” I was like, “that is part of the job sometimes, you have to have that face, [so that] people cannot be able to read you.” Yes, I am friendly, and I go in with a smile but there are sometimes in some situations [where you don’t]. Another thing is that I felt that I was giving too much at [the school where I was an assistant principal]. I was giving, giving, giving, giving everything that I got, and I would feel empty at the end of the day, you know? And then my husband with all of this about “you have changed a lot.” So, I knew that I had to either move forward and figure things out or move a step back or lateral; consider what I wanted to do. And I think this position right now, is a move lateral, and it is kind of giving me that break to analyze. What do I want?

...I think that for me, as a female school leader, it’s a lot of sacrifices. Because I know if I become a principal, I’m divorced. I know, 100%, and you cannot have a family, and if you can, something has got to give. And if you are like me, that I want it all, not that I want to be perfectionist, but I want it all; it is really hard. And that is where I am right now. How can I have my teammate? How can I still grow in my career, maintaining it and maybe having a family? That is where I am at and that is what I am trying to figure out. So, for all females, we have a challenge, more for Latinas because you know how your mother raised you. You know the stories [we grow up with]. You want to have that time too. You know you don’t want to think only about the next step, what is the next thing—that is very individualistic and just work, work, work.

Hilda's testimonio highlights multiple, layered tensions related to mothering, family expectations, and career advancement based on varying cultural norms, similar to Reyes (2015) and Murakami-Ramalho's (2008) findings that indicate even the possibility for family/work conflict worries potential Latina school leaders. While Hilda's experiences are unique, other Latina leaders' intersectional identities—as leaders, wives, and mothers—complicated their career decisions as they wrestled with traditional gender roles and their own expectations of mothering, within a schooling system and larger American society that is structured to uphold white, middle class, individualistic values and norms.

The Criticality of Mentorship

In their testimonios, the Latina leaders spoke of the significant impact that mentors play in recruiting and retaining Latina school leaders. Some shared how they had been tapped and supported by others into the administrative pipeline. Others discussed what they were doing in their current positions to recruit and support Latina leaders, to change the leadership pipeline. Among these accounts, Clara's was significant because of how impacted she was for not having had a Latina mentor; she might have felt less isolated as one of the few Latina leaders in her city in California and potentially have been guided better so as to remain in administration.

...Being a school leader is so lonely, so lonely on so many levels. And it's hard because sometimes you make decisions, and sometimes they're not the right decisions at the end of the day, but they needed to have been made. It's tough when you know they come from a good place, but it just didn't turn out how you would have wanted them to be. I think, particularly for me, even though I'm the majority—Latinos are a majority or at least half of the population in our city—there's not enough people in this same role.

So, it's hard for me to have a mentor that understands what it means to be successful. And because of me being Latina, I bring my culture and my way of being to my work. It really makes an impact on how you learn and how you operate. So, when you really don't have anybody that can guide you in a way that makes sense, it's tough right? Also, something that we shouldn't forget is, as a woman, being a mother for me is so important. And it takes a lot to be a mother. It takes a lot to be a school leader. The way that my trajectory happened, I happened to be both at the same time. I got pregnant with my first child two weeks after I was hired as an AP. It happened coincidentally, so weird. I couldn't get pregnant for a year and then once I stopped trying is when it happened. Go figure, right? So, I entered parenthood and being an administrator at the same time, which were both hard, but I was able to do it pretty well. But then baby number two came and then that's when things got extra tough. Because two [kids] changes everything, I say. And then it just got to the point where, at least for me as an individual, I had to pick whether to be a better mom and find a different job—even though being an administrator had been my dream job for a very long time—or to be a better mom and still be a professional. Because being a professional and just working and contributing to society is just such a big part of who I am as a human being. So, I had to leave administration to be able to at least mentally be present with my children. And I think maybe it could have been different if I would have had somebody that could have guided me better in my trajectory of a school leader. You know? Somebody who could relate to me, not only as a woman, but as a Latina, as a mother.

Confronting and Addressing Racism and Sexism

The four Latina leaders spoke of inequities and injustices they experienced, often in the form of subtle microaggressions and gender discrimination within their schools and districts. However, in Alexia's testimonio she spoke of how she experienced blatant sexism and low expectations of her abilities to work with "tough" students in a diverse middle school. These low expectations and stereotypical assumptions made in regards to her and her students were reminiscent of Alexia's own experience in the education system as a child, which are presented first to provide context for her entry into school leadership.

...When I started elementary school, I didn't know how to speak English. Both of my parents were from Mexico. So, in my house it was all Spanish. When I finally got to school, I didn't know how to speak English. I remember growing up in a small town in west Texas. My teachers were predominately white and speaking Spanish was frowned upon. It's not something that I felt you should be proud of. It was something that—even after I learned to speak English—you do not speak Spanish. When you speak Spanish, that makes you look bad; only poor people or uneducated people speak Spanish. So, for a long time, I wouldn't speak Spanish. I remember my first year teacher used to get really frustrated with me because I didn't understand what she was saying. It got to the point where she called my parents and said that she would have me tested for special education because she felt that I was learning disabled.

...And my mother, who like I said only spoke Spanish, was a very educated woman. She was like, "I know my child. I know my child is not learning disabled. Right now, it's just a language barrier but she's going to get it." She refused to sign the letter to have me tested, so instead they retained me. So, I was held back. I remember my mother

crying, upset, saying, “This is not why I came to this country. What are they doing to my child?” She kind of took that frustration out on me and said, “You will learn. And you will speak English, and this is what you’re going to do.” In about a year and a half I was exited out of the ESL program and was an A honor roll student from that moment on. And I never looked back. But I do remember being taken out of the classroom and working in the closet with the teacher who would help me try to learn English. I remember the frustration in my teacher’s face. I felt unwanted. Once I got to high school and they said, ‘What do you want to do?’—I was like, “I want to help other kids who are going through the same things that I went through.” I want to be that teacher that says, “There’s nothing wrong with speaking Spanish. Let me help you. Let me guide you. Let me do something for you.” And so that’s why I went into education.

...When I first took that AP [assistant principal] job, they [education colleagues] asked, “Are you sure? You’re going to be dealing with fights. You’re going to be dealing with this.” I remember this one guy in particular who was from another school said, “Man, what [your campus] needs is a strong man to go in there and just tell the kids who the boss is.” I was like, “You wouldn’t last one day with my children. They would eat you alive. Because that’s what they respond to.” That’s what he said, “a strong man.” I’m like, “No, we’ve had strong men and my kids walk all over them. They don’t do that with me.”

...I think what people miss is how strong a Latina female school leader can actually be and what an impact they have on kids. Because in a school like mine where the kids are predominately Hispanic, they need those role models. They need to see that,

you know what, here is a Latina who has made it. I tell my kids, “I’m a single mom, so I’ve got to balance my family and then you guys. And I come in everyday and deal with the challenges, absolutely. It’s hard being a single mother and making sure that your kids are taken care of, that they get to daycare, that they get to bed and then come in and try to fix the problems that are going on, on campus. And trying to motivate you guys, trying to be there for you guys.” And the stories that I hear from my kiddos. “My mother walked out on me when I was three years old. I’ve never seen her since then. So maybe I am the way that I am because I’m missing that part of my life.” Or the kid coming in crying because their parents are in prison again and now they got to go live with a tía who doesn’t like them. I think as Latina leaders we do a lot more in counseling—more than all the curriculum—because the kids feel comfortable and they come to you...

...And a lot of times, you’re the only Latina sitting in a classroom or a meeting with fifty APs...because that still happens. I sit in meetings and I’m like, “Why is it that we have so many Hispanic kids but so few Hispanic leaders?” And then they always tell me, “You know we’ve got the principal at [X] High School and she’s Latina. She’s really good! She’s really good.” If she’s really good, why don’t we put more in that position? Why does it take longer? And then give us the opportunity to work with someone like that, share her stories. What do you do? How do you run your campus? If she’s good, there’s got to be more out there that are just as good. I know when there’s a job opening you always think, or at least when I go in, I think, “Who am I going against?” And once I know, I’m like, “Oh my goodness, what do I have to do to make myself get the job?” Growing up it didn’t matter how good I was, at the end, because I was Hispanic, I wasn’t

going to get the position that I wanted. It was always given to somebody who was white.

And I think because I dealt with that growing up, it's always stuck with me.

Alexia's testimonio reflects how as a Latina she was stereotyped, underestimated, and undervalued; in being one of the few Latinas in her district she was also marginalized. Yet she persisted and resisted, advocating for herself and her Latinx students by drawing on the cultural and linguistic assets she had developed in dealing with systemic educational inequities.

Harnessing Bilingualism to Empower Self and Others

All four Latinas identified as bilingual in their ability to speak, read, and write in both English and Spanish, and they noted this as an asset that set them apart, affording them unique opportunities in their professional trajectories and their ability to forge relationships with Latinx families. Yet for Sara, much like Alexia's testimonio previously revealed, being a Spanish heritage speaker and recent immigrant from Uruguay as a child in the New York and Texas education systems provided harmful and hurtful experiences. In her testimonio, Sara reflected on how she harnessed her bilingualism as a campus and district administrator to advocate for children and families, particularly bilingual, Latinx, and immigrant communities.

...So, when I came to the U.S. from Uruguay at the age of 5, I was put in English only education. I think that I have a lot of scars from that. I remember in high school riding the Mexican bus, but I am not a Mexican. I am from Uruguay. And I tried to be Mexican. I even got married to a Mexican and then I got divorced from him...[I grew up] in Queens [New York], just the salad bowl of the world. I didn't even know the word white for a person until I moved to Texas, in eighth grade, which was kind of a culture shock. I think being Latina, my language and my identity has formed every decision I

have made, [in a way] that I can't articulate to you. College was the place where I really got clear about the pain I had had as a kid; learning English and what all that meant. Because I really hadn't had a chance to examine that or process it, or reflect on it, or be asked about it. I remember the first year at [school] teaching, a community organizer—this community organizing work we did as a school with the organization that I ended up working for 15 years later—the organizer asked, “Why did you become a teacher?” I said because I was the eldest of three, and I am really in charge. But then after she probed me, she started asking me about growing up, and I said, “you know what, I really became a teacher because I don't want any kid to go through what I went through.” To have to choose between English and Spanish. To have to choose to be Mexican because that was the way to be accepted. So, that was really my drive, and I think working with families that have gone through my story as an immigrant or as an English language learner, that is what I am drawn to. That is where the energy to keep going [comes from]. I probably wouldn't do well in a school that didn't have kids of color. I kind of came full circle; I ended up in the bilingual office with a deep conviction of making sure that kids have access to that and don't get denied that support that I was denied.

My sister was not denied that support, she is three years younger....and for some reason in New York City when bilingual ed passed, the law didn't really infiltrate the schools we attended, when I attended. The pictures of my second grade teachers were African American and white. My sister's pictures, they [the teachers] were all Latinas. So, something changed in the system because my sister is the most articulate bilingual that I have ever known; the proof of bilingual education done right is my sister. I struggle. I have so many gaps in English. My writing is so difficult....and I think it comes

from that. It comes from experience; not being allowed to ever use any of my funds of knowledge in any of my learning. I had gone to kindergarten in Uruguay. I knew my letters, I knew a lot in Spanish...So, it's really been clear to me the value of bilingual ed and access to language, and I think that has been a driver.

...I mean linguistically I am very grounded in the belief that if you do not speak English or you do not grow [up] in a household that speaks English that 'English only' doesn't give you the best result. I am very clear about that. I mean I've seen it with my sister and I. 'English only' for an English language learner is not the answer to English, to the best English. It is English, but it is not going to be the cognitive English. I am really clear about that. And then seeing the opportunities of using what kids know in order for them to learn more deeply [is important], rather than thinking that what kids know gets in the way of new learning. So, what they know allows them to have new learning and to build new learning and [their home language is] not a deficit. So, right now we have 500 Arabic speakers in the district. There is no bilingual program for Arabic speakers, but we are really trying to allow teachers to allow kids to express themselves in their writing in Arabic. Even if the teacher doesn't understand it; to be able to bring their parents to conversations about their learning. To [help teachers to] not see the language of the home as a deficit because there is a lot of deficit thinking about that; that it [home language] gets in the way. Spanish gets in the way of English. We got to not build the Spanish because building the Spanish takes time away from the English. No, building the Spanish only strengthens your time with English. It doesn't take it away. So, looking at all of that very differently. I feel like I am still growing in that and learning

about it, but I feel really confident that that is the best way for kids to learn and the fact that being bilingual is an asset and not a deficit.

...And then their [students] struggles, not just their language, but how the kids are so smart in so many ways and resilient because there are so many funds of knowledge that they have from surviving day-by-day, in poverty. Making the food go longer, being resourceful, problem-solving, all of that. I used to watch my sisters until my mom came home from cleaning houses. That's huge, right? So, I think all of those things that they bring, to me, they are skills that they bring. And I think immigrants and people who struggle and have challenges, they bring something to their being that people who are privileged can't have...

...And you know, as corny as it sounds, I feel a sense of obligation towards others that are coming into this country as immigrants that don't know English. So, not resting in my own success, but being real clear of my responsibility to make sure that other people understand that their language and their culture and their identity matter. What an impact it can make through their chosen career. I think that's kind of part of the responsibility that I feel.

...My challenges, the one that I am being faced with right now in front of me, is navigating the needs of kids and families versus compliance. Because I think it is a crime when the systems don't work for the kids that they are supposed to...Sometimes I think *Lau v. Nichols* and *Brown v. Board*, all of those things that were meant to give access can have a double-edged sword and be interpreted and used by agencies and others to create additional bureaucracies. Our children now that are truly bilingual—a lot of kids now that are growing up are kids that are English language learners, 75% of them in [district] were

born here—they are not coming. They are not the immigrant that used to come, but there is still lots of poverty, still lots of needs. But on the home language survey, they have to choose one language and they are not from one language...No matter what I do, I cannot get that damn form to change. And then if a mom doesn't understand that form, and she wants to fix it, she's got to do it within five days. After five days if the mom puts Spanish, Spanish, Spanish [on the three questions], she can't change it. So, it is a lot of compliance things. I understand that you have to have accountability for the federal money and the state money...But you know, we are talking about 4 and 5-year-olds trying to get into a public education system and sometimes we make that system harder than it should be, or than it has to be.

Discussion

The four testimonios offered here shed light on an under researched but significant group of school leaders: Latinas. The four Latina leaders shared how facets of their identities shaped their experiences, development, and persistence in campus and district leadership in both unique and similar ways; although three out of the four were of Mexican descent, born in the U.S., and situated in Texas. Applying an intersectionality framework provided a means of considering how the Latina leaders' experiences, as detailed in their testimonios within the four overarching themes, were shaped by larger inequitable social structures and power dynamics; extending the work of previous scholars (Bagula, 2016; Hernandez & Murakami, 2016a, 2016b; Martinez, 2014; Méndez-Morse, 2000, 2004; Morales, 2014; Palacio, 2013, Pimienta, 2014; Ramsey, 2013; Reyes, 2015; Ruiz-Williams, 2015, Santiago, 2009).

For one, this study broadens our understanding of the complexities and anguish that can arise when Latina school leaders consider, strive for, and struggle to persist in school leadership positions. When confronting traditional gender roles, including cultural and societal expectations, the testimonios demonstrate the range of experiences Latina school leaders face, including what Santiago (2009) described as both self-imposed and external career obstacles. Hilda, for instance, found herself at an impasse, feeling stymied by her own hopes of being a traditional Mexican wife and mother, while reckoning with the realities that would come with being a school principal in terms of time. Clara admitted to having similar difficulties in reconciling her time and roles as a school leader and mother, especially once she had her second child. Without sufficient mentorship, and a Latina administrator who was similarly a mother to guide her, Clara chose to leave her campus leadership position, despite it being her “dream job.”

Of particular note then, is the extent to which potential Latina school leaders consider even the possibility of family/work conflict in their decisions to pursue leadership, which echoes Reyes’ (2015) work. The traditional U.S. school as a workplace, viewed as more individualistic and not embracing strong communal ties (Trumbull et al., 2001), can be off putting to Latinas under the pressure of self or externally imposed gender norms related to being a wife and mother, such as being selfless and sacrificing or “la reina de la casa,” as Murakami-Ramalho (2008) notes. The testimonios revealed women who wanted both—to be a leader *and* to be a mother—yet some Latinas may find themselves opting out of the pursuit of leadership positions if they do not see the rigors of school leadership as compatible with their own identities as mothers or future mothers; reiterating the need for more Latina role models, the teaching of women’s leadership competencies (Murakami-Ramalho, 2008), as well as the continued

examination of the ways in which school leadership roles are conceived and (mis)aligned with the cultural and gendered values of women leaders, and women leaders of color in particular.

In concert, is the critical role of mentoring, particularly from other Latinas, which continues to be lacking and is considered a key aspect that could potentially help recruit and retain more Latina administrators as they navigate the “isms” they often encounter within their careers. Such culturally relevant mentoring continues to be a need, not only for Latina leaders (Méndez-Morse, 2004; Murakami-Ramalho, 2008), but also for other women leaders of color confronted with race, gender, and/or age barriers (Jean-Marie, 2013; Reed, 2012). The majority of the African American and Hispanic female educational leaders in Enomoto, Gardiner, and Grogan’s (2000) study, for instance, “desired mentors who were similar to themselves in race and gender, noting reasons such as ease of communication, greater affinity, and desire for role models” (p. 578). Yet, like the participants in their study, all four Latina leaders often had to forge cross-race and gender mentoring relationships to help them navigate and advance their careers. In being cognizant of the limited number of Latina administrators in the field who can serve as mentors, participants like Sara purposefully encouraged and mentored early career Latinas into leadership.

Interweaving throughout the testimonios were also notions of hypervisibility and invisibility. When considering that the Latinas were underrepresented in school leadership roles in their respective districts, this often contributed to their hypervisibility, at times resulting in being tokenized, essentialized, or discriminated against, while the underinvestment and undervaluing of some of their skills, contributions, and development simultaneously contributed to their invisibility. Research on Asian American (Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017) and African

American (Jean-Marie, 2013) women in public school administration have similarly revealed their experiences with hypervisibility, while the work of Gonzales, Murakami, and Núñez (2013) on Latina academics suggests similar findings to that in this study; providing a means for comparison. Gonzales, Murakami, and Núñez (2013) claim that the power relations that continue to structure academia results in feelings of isolation and loneliness among Latinas, contributing to their being “hyper visible and at the same time invisible” (p. 80). Power relations similarly shape K-12 school and district administration, resulting in few Latina administrators and contributing to feelings of isolation, loneliness, and experiences with racism and sexism.

Finally, all four leaders referred to their being bilingual as significantly shaping their experiences as Latinas within educational institutions in both positive and negative ways, in their roles as students, educators, and administrators. That being a bilingual Spanish-speaking Latina served as a double-edged sword for most of the participants is of no surprise in light of the history of subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) and deficit thinking in the U.S. towards to Latinxs (Valencia, 2010), where assimilationist schooling practices and policies were used to eradicate Latinxs’ native Spanish language through English only programs and corporal punishment. Participants that were immigrants and/or whose first language was Spanish, as in the case of Sara and Alexia, vividly recalled painful experiences as children in U.S. schools, which served as a catalyst for their wanting to address such injustices as educators; ultimately shaping their identities and approach as school leaders (Murakami et al., 2015). Participants’ bilingualism was equally part of their cultural identity and leadership identity, providing a means of connection and an opportunity for them to act as agents of change to help empower and serve

the needs of Latinx students and families (Bagula, 2016; Hernandez & Murakami, 2016a; Ramsey, 2013).

Implications for policy, practice, and future research

The four rich, nuanced testimonios offered by Hilda, Clara, Alexia, and Sara are timely and vital as they inform our understanding of leadership from the perspective of Latinas, as well as for women of color leaders and leaders of color in general. It would behoove current and upcoming school leaders and those working to prepare school leaders to interrogate the systems and policies currently in place that inhibit more Latina educators, and more educators of color, from moving into and staying in leadership positions, given the cultural and linguistic assets of Latina school leaders, and other leaders of color, and the importance of having leaders who reflect the changing student demographics in our country (Author, and colleagues 2015, 2018; Crawford & Fuller, 2017; Hernandez & Murakami, 2016a; Murakami, Valle, & Méndez-Morse, 2013; Sánchez, Thornton, & Usinger, 2009). As Elizondo (2005) suggested, bilingual teachers and administrators can more aptly serve the growing Latinx student population by moving into administrative positions. Therefore, more—and better—policies and programs that support moving Latinx students through PK-12 to and through college, providing funding for higher education through administrative certification, and helping place them in administrative positions thereafter are critical to fulfilling the Latina/o leadership imperative (Hernandez & Murakami, 2016a). Furthermore, policymakers must provide funding for sufficient school administration positions to remove some of the burden from over-worked school leaders, thus creating a more sustainable work-life balance. Districts with large Spanish-speaking Latinx student populations must also ensure there are sufficient translators on campuses and should consider investing in

language training for current administrators to learn Spanish. This way Spanish-speaking Latinx administrators are not pigeon-holed or overly burdened because of their bilingualism and Latinx students and families can feel supported and able to connect with multiple educational advocates on a campus.

Latina school leaders participating in this study emphasized the importance of ongoing supports from colleagues and mentors to help them overcome isolation, institutional politics, and discrimination. Importantly, some Latina leaders revealed how their experiences with discrimination and marginalization within the workplace, issues that must be acknowledged and addressed in practice, affected their efforts to address equity issues within their schools. In particular, participants noted the benefit of having mentors who understood their experiences and supported their needs, both professional and familial. Districts can focus on institutionalizing culturally-responsive mentorship programs, while school leaders can also be purposeful in providing time and space for colleagues to seek and provide mentorship (Elizondo, 2005; Méndez-Morse, 2004).

Opportunities to transition into the principalship, which are vital, can also be ensured by district and campus leaders who can encourage and support more Latina teachers to take on leadership roles and administrative duties on their campuses, to get a sense of what being a principal entails. Districts can work with state and national associations to inform their efforts; for instance, the Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents (ALAS) began a networking and mentoring program called Linking Latina Leaders that convenes during their annual conference to help develop and support Latina school administrators (2017, p. 3).

Educational leadership preparation programs must also incorporate literature on and organize panels with Latina school leaders, as well as other underrepresented and marginalized school leaders, in courses so that future school leaders might be cognizant of the assets, needs, and navigational skills of these promising administrators. Case studies highlighting the issues Latina school leaders have encountered can also be presented to students beforehand, allowing them the opportunity to process and generate solutions for documented difficulties. Principal preparation programs should also optimize the time during internship courses when educational leadership students are paired with mentors from their schools, often current principals or assistant principals, to engage in discussions about the realities of being a school leader, and specifically a woman of color leader.

As more and more Latinas enter into and persist in the role of educational leaders, there will be opportunities for educational researchers to explore and expand on the thematic findings introduced here, including: the extent to which the current demands and role of school leaders can more aptly support the familial and cultural values and lives of Latinas who are or want to be mothers, wives, and administrators, the importance of mentors on the longevity of Latinas' careers as educational leaders, and the impacts of district and state policies and practices on expanding the pipeline of Latina leaders in PK-12 educational settings. There is also still a need for more scholarly exploration on the role of sexual orientation and gender identity in the lives of Latina school leaders, which did not emerge as relevant to the experiences of the four Latina leaders in this study. Additionally, future studies could examine distinctions in experiences among Latina leaders of varying racial and phenotypical backgrounds, as such distinctions were not purposefully explored in this study.

In utilizing testimonio as a methodological tool to capture the narratives of four Latina leaders, this study also pushes the boundaries within academia, and in this case EAQ, to embrace evolving methodologies that center new and multiple forms of knowledge and how knowledge is shared and documented. Thus, we encourage critical scholars, scholars of color, and scholarly allies to similarly utilize methodological approaches and frameworks that extend our understandings of leadership from the perspectives of Latinas, women of color leaders, and leaders of color, that reflect the lived experiences of these communities, as they have historically been silenced and marginalized within our field.

Conclusion

Hilda, Clara, Alexia, and Sara were resilient, hopeful, and dedicated school leaders whose layered and interconnected social identities were inextricably linked with their professional experiences and development as educational leaders. Findings from this study highlighted the diversity within the Latina community as demonstrated by the range of their experiences, interpretations of their settings, and responses to controversy, change and expectations of themselves and others. Their testimonios, revealing both their triumphs and struggles, centered on themes that warrant greater attention and further examination: confronting gender roles and expectations of motherhood, the criticality of mentorship, confronting and addressing racism and sexism, and harnessing bilingualism to empower self and others.

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Table 1 Demographic information and Position at time of study for Latina school leaders

Name	Ethnic origin & residence	Position at time of study
Sara	Born in Uruguay, attended school in New York and Texas, lives in Texas	Director of a Dual Language Department, previously Elementary Assistant Principal and Principal
Hilda	Mexican descent, born in Texas, raised in Mexico, returned to Texas after college	Coordinator for Dual Language Department, previously Elementary Assistant Principal
Alexia	Mexican descent, born and lives in Texas	Middle School Assistant Principal
Clara	Mexican descent, born and lives in California	Works at an educational nonprofit, previously Elementary Assistant Principal and Principal