

Chapter 9

Latina Efficacy: Advocate, Inspire, and Take Charge

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ABSTRACT

School systems are notorious for resisting change and this causes moral and ethical dilemmas for those seeking equality within these settings. The primary barrier to current social movements is often the weariness of school organizations. Leaders who are tired of seeing the inequality in schools become the voice of change. Their mission is to make a difference, but ethical dilemmas may heighten when confronting social injustice within school systems. Although the Hispanic enrollment in schools has increased, Latina leadership remains unnoticed, and Latina superintendents are underrepresented in the superintendency. This chapter focuses exclusively on Mexican American female superintendents and portrays their ethical dilemmas while leading schools in what some may consider challenging school districts. There are distinct patterns in the types of school districts that Mexican American female superintendents choose to lead and they demonstrate a personal drive and commitment for improving educational opportunities for all children, regardless of social economic status and ethnicity.

INTRODUCTION

The origin of power aligns with the construction of social norms which have restricted leadership roles to women in fields that have been masculinized. White males have historically dominated the top leadership positions in school organizations within a vertical and patriarchal model; where the White man is at the top of the organizational structure and minority groups at the bottom (Brunner, 1999, 2000, 2002; Blount, 1996; Grogan, 1996, 2005; Galloway, 2006; Tallerico, 2005). The number of women in leadership roles remains scarce, even though, research supports the notion that leadership based on women's way of knowing can facilitate equity and more inclusive school environments (Irby & Brown, 2002). Furthermore, studies have indicated the importance of promoting leaders of color who can serve as role models for students of color (Jackson, 1999; Nicholson, 1999; Ortiz, 1999). Historically, research on educational administration has often been written by men about men while research on female su-

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perintendents has not been extensive (Brunner, 2002; Grogan, 2000; Tallerico, 1999). The majority of research on women in educational leadership spotlights White female administrators and women of color have been unnoticed. Researchers examining school leaders have paid relatively little attention to the life experiences and careers of ethnic minority women and there are fewer researchers of color who explore leadership characteristics of Mexican American female superintendents.

Latinas in leadership have shared personal stories of ethical problem solving when advocating for equitable education (Rodriguez, 2014). This chapter provides insight on Latina leadership as it relates to Mexican American cultural identity and ethical dilemmas in educational leadership. The stories of six Mexican American female superintendents are portrayed, Rita Chavez, Dr. Gabriella Evans, Catherine Garcia, Dr. Irma Gonzalez, Rebecca Roberts, and Dr. Isabel Salinas. These women of color took charge of their career goals, dared to take risks in educational leadership and are an exclusive group of Mexican American women in a profession that has been governed by White males. Their stories will inoculate other women to overcome the conventional barriers that exist in schools and understand the value of “self” to take charge of their professional goals while making ethical decisions.

BACKGROUND

Qualitative feminist research has differentiated ideologies with varying and complex views (Olesen, 1994). Female experiences differ and women of color have experienced complex oppressions, which are not always “understood by white feminists” (Olesen, 1994, p. 160). The theoretical framework for this presentation is grounded in a Chicana feminist perspective which acknowledges that social inequalities exists based on ethnicity and gender. Chicana feminism contradicts the stereotype of the passive Mexican woman and expanded the “Chicano nationalism to include the role of assertive strong Chicanas” (Garcia, 1997, p. 18). Feminist research gives voice to marginalized groups and scholars such as Sprague (2005) contend that gender “in interaction with many other areas like race/ethnicity, class, and ability is a key organizer of social life” and understanding how things work allows feminists to “take action to make the social world more equitable” (p. 3).

Chicana feminist theory recognizes that the intersection of race and gender play a crucial role when it comes to women breaking the glass ceiling (Rodriguez, 2014). Alston (2005) suggests that researchers consider race and gender as a “lens to investigate the intersectionality of lived experiences” (p.684). Research on Mexican American women exposes barriers associated to ethnicity and gender for women seeking top educational administrative positions (Carrion-Mendez, 2009). Mendez-Morse (2000) identified historical descriptions of successful Latina leaders and contradicted the atypical stereo types of Mexican American women. Women of color are aware of the disparities they will face because of the color of their skin (Rodriguez, 2014). Chicana inquiry focuses on giving voice to the voiceless and narrating the experiences of women who have been absent from research.

ISSUES

All six superintendents spoke of encountering issues related to the historical segregation and the educational injustices as a result of the past segregation policies. Historically Mexican American’s have

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