

Career Experiences of Latino/a Secondary Principals in Suburban School Districts

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In this phenomenological study, Latino/a secondary principals from suburban school districts were interviewed regarding their career advancement experiences. Participants described various motivators (drivers) and barriers experienced throughout their principal careers in suburban schools. Data were analyzed and interpreted using Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological reduction approach and framed by Lewin's (1954) force-field analysis theory. Internal drivers included: passion for educational leadership and drive and determination. External drivers comprised family support and mentoring. Internal barriers were career doubt and questioning of own leadership capacities. External barriers comprised gender bias and district level resistance to Latino/a diversity in hiring. Implications for the recruitment and retention of Latino/a principals in suburban school districts, as well as principal leadership preparation programs are discussed.

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Introduction

U.S. education scholars contend that diverse school leaders who mirror the races and ethnicities of the diverse student populations they serve provide positive role models for all students, and increase the motivation and engagement of students of color (Carillo, 2004; Hill & Torres, 2010; Jones, 2002). Furthermore, researchers suggest that student engagement and academic performance might be influenced by the presence or absence of adult role models, both teachers and principals, who students identify with ethnically or racially (Padilla, 2003; Tresslar, 2012). Moreover, a growing number of secondary students who are Latino/a are enrolled in suburban school districts throughout the United States (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012). Yet, the percentage of Latino/a secondary principals do not reflect the number of Latino/a secondary students, particularly in suburban school districts (Pew Hispanic Center, 2011). In one study, the California Association of Latino Superintendents and Administrators (CALSA) noted large statistical gaps when comparing the number of Latino/a school leaders to the numbers of Latino/a students served in the state of California (Magdaleno, 2006). In Texas, large gaps also exist between the numbers of Latino/a principals and non-Latino/a principals working in Texas schools, especially in suburban secondary schools with increasing Latino/a student populations (Tresslar, 2010). Overall, few studies have been conducted that focus on Latino/a secondary school principals or the experiences of Latino/a principals who work in suburban, rather than urban, school districts. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Latino/a secondary school principals who worked in suburban school districts, as well as to identify these principals' perceptions of the supports and barriers they experienced in advancing their careers.

Overview of Relevant Literature

Some scholars and policy-makers have proposed strategies for recruiting, retaining, developing, and guiding potential Latino/a school leaders and have stressed that having Latino/a school leaders in place is essential to addressing the needs of a growing Latino/a student population throughout the United States, particularly in suburban and rural schools where less Latino/a principals are employed than in more urban districts (Contreras, 2004; Magdaleno, 2009; Young, Young, Oto, 2011). Moreover, some scholars have suggested that the extent of school engagement and academic performance of minority students, in general, might be influenced by the presence or absence of adult role models, both teachers and principals, with whom students identify either ethnically or racially (Padilla, 2003; Tresslar, 2010).

In examining Latino/a school leadership, other researchers have discovered that non-White school leadership candidates tend to be held to a higher degree of scrutiny due to the fact that most recruitment agencies, school board members, and superintendents are White males, which can lead to maintenance of the status quo in not supporting racially, ethnically, and gender diverse school leadership (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Tallerico, 2000). In one study, Garcia & Guerra (2004) uncovered processes of deficit thinking by which a Latino/a leaders were judged to be less qualified solely on their ethnic status.

In exploring pathways to the superintendency for Latino/a school leaders, Tallerico (2000) observed two pathways to obtaining these positions. First, in the traditional route, applicants apply for jobs and a selection committee, usually appointed by the school board, sorts

through candidates and makes selections based on articulated needs. Secondly, school boards recruit successful candidates from other districts and positions or used recruitment agencies to find appropriate candidates. Tallerico (2000) suggested that gatekeepers were often a barrier in the hiring of school leaders of color because these gatekeeping district employees had valuable information regarding the hiring process that often gave preferred White candidates substantial advantages over Latino/a candidates. In particular Bjork (2000) discovered that Latino superintendents often were perceived as incompetent in managing district budgets and finances.

In the state of Texas, demographic trends suggest that Latino/a population numbers will continue to rise and, therefore, will lead to an increase in the number of Latino/a students enrolled in Texas school districts (Hodgkinson, 2000; LeCroy & Krysik, 2008). Additionally, many Texas school districts have documented academic performance gaps between Latino/a students and students from other ethnic groups, particularly as gaps relate to poor high school graduation rates (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). However, Romero (2005) suggested that adequately responding to demographic changes within school districts to ensure mirrored diversity in leadership has been difficult for many districts to accomplish.

Overall, despite demographic trends reflecting increasing Latino/a student enrollment, few studies have been conducted on the career choices of Latino/a educational leaders and what contributes to the retention and success of these school leaders (DeAngelis & Kawakyu O'Connor, 2012; Magdaleno, 2009). Nieto (2006), in highlighting a leadership crisis in the Latino/a educational community, described how evaluating the career paths of Latino/a educational leaders might provide insight into the motivation and reasoning behind job choices. Based on study findings, Magdaleno (2006) advocated the need for mentoring programs to support the advancement of Latino/a school administrators. Scholars concur that further investigations are essential to understanding the career choices and perceptions that Latino/a secondary school administrators have regarding their potential for advancement (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Myung, Loeb, & Horng, 2011; Young et al., 2011).

Conceptual Framework

Lewin's force field analysis was used to provide an overarching framework for exploring drivers and barriers to Latino/a principals' career decisions and mobility (Lewin, 1951). Bandura's (1993) self-efficacy theory served as a framework for exploring Latino/a principal participants' internal drivers in making their career choices. External drivers were explored through the lens of Latino critical race theory (Aleman, 2009a, 2009b; Solózano & Yosso, 2002), which often is referred to as LatCrit (Huber, 2010).

Lewin's (1951) force field analysis theory was relevant to describing the drivers and barriers that Latino/a secondary principals might experience throughout the course of their careers. Lewin suggested that if an entity increases the driving forces and decreases the resistance to change, progress was possible. Lewin (1951) warned that if an individual increases the driving forces without decreasing barriers, more tension and conflict was possible.

Internal drivers for Latino/a secondary principals' career choices might best be understood through a lens of self-efficacy theory. Bandura (1993) suggested that self-efficacy was derived from successful experiences and achievement. Moreover, Bandura linked an individual's self-efficacy beliefs with internal drivers that determined motivation, and consequently, predicted effort and perseverance when beset by obstacles. Bandura's social

cognitive theory also can be applied when investigating career paths because the process of goal setting and the attribute of self-confidence have been determined to be pivotal for job promotion (Bandura & Locke, 2003). Bandura and Locke (2003) stated that goal setting, self-efficacy, and human functioning are all intricately interwoven into the human psyche and might predict the ability to achieve occupational success. The application of motivation and self-efficacy, as they pertain to Latino/a secondary school principals, potentially provides insights into their career experiences.

Aleman and Aleman (2010) described how Latino/as must seek opportunities to advance first by placating White superiors and aligning their interests in ways that serve the superior's interests more than their own and more often than White subordinates typically would be required to do. Aleman and Aleman (2010) also asserted that when cultural factors were considered, it was difficult to measure the differences between Latino/a cultural norms and the transfer of these cultural norms to a mainstream workplace environment. Moreover, in their investigation, problems with assimilation to work culture predicted the lack of movement for Latino/a secondary school administrators (Aleman & Aleman, 2010).

Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) was used to provide a more specific framework for the Latino/a sociological experience (Aleman, 2009a, 2009b; Huber, 2009, 2010; Villalpando, 2003). Latino Critical Theory scholars (e.g., Aleman, 2009a; Aleman & Aleman, 2010) have indicated that although critical race theory has been useful when analyzing the whole spectrum of societal and racial implications, Latino/as have encountered specific barriers and therefore needed to address racism by applying a unique set of tenets that directly apply to the Latino/a/Latino experience. Critical race theorists have been quick to emphasize that LatCrit complements the work of critical race theory but does have specifically unique tenets (Aleman, 2009a). LatCrit scholars have utilized the process of counter-storytelling methodologies, such as narratives and phenomenology, to provide Latino/a educators with opportunities to share their views of racial and societal implications (Sorlozano & Yosso, 2002).

Research Questions

This qualitative study consisted of a central research question and two subquestions. The central research question was: What are the experiences of select Latino/a secondary school principals regarding their career advancement in suburban school districts? Subquestions comprised the following: (a) What are the perceived internal drivers and barriers to career advancement for select Latino/a secondary school principals in suburban districts?; and (b) What are the perceived external drivers and barriers to career advancement for select Latino/a secondary school principals in suburban districts?

Method

A phenomenological research approach was applied to address the research questions in this study designed to explore the career experiences of five select secondary school principals who were Latino/a and worked in suburban districts. A phenomenological approach was deemed the most appropriate by the researcher to capture the lived experiences of the principal participants. According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenological research allows for exploration of shared experiences among a group of participants.

Participant Selection and Procedures

Criteria sampling and network sampling were used to identify potential participants. To participate in the study, participants had to: (a) identify as Hispanic or Latino/a; (b) have been a secondary principal working in a suburban district for at least six years. Due to the limited number of Latino principals working in suburban (not urban) districts, network sampling was necessary to identify these principals through community contacts. Five suburban secondary school principals who met participation criteria, consented to being interviewed and recorded. Each Latino/a principal were interviewed at length and interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours. All interviews were transcribed for analysis. To protect participant and school district identities, pseudonyms, rather than real names, were used for all districts mentioned in the interviews, as well as the principals interviewed. Pseudo Spanish surnames were used for all principals in place of their real names. Participants were asked to review transcripts for accuracy.

Data Analysis

Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological reduction approach was used to analyze the interview data from the transcripts. Following the phenomenological reduction procedures, first, significant statements were identified for each participant and put on an Excel spreadsheet. Then, *horizontalization* was conducted to identify and cluster related significant statements across the participants. These were initially coded using *in vivo* coding. As common themes emerged, descriptive codes were used to identify and categories or similar themes across the participants as they related the principals' shared career experiences as Latino/a secondary principals working in suburban districts. Structured descriptions were then created for each participant. Spanish pseudonyms were created for each of the principals' surnames and real surnames were not used.

Results

Through the phenomenological reduction analysis process, eight themes were revealed. Interpretation of this data revealed both drivers and barriers to the success of the Latino/a secondary principals interviewed in this study. These themes are represented in Figure 1 as they related to internal and external drivers that the principals perceived in describing their career experiences, as well as Lewin's conceptual framework. The eight themes then were categorized accordingly as follows. Internal drivers included: (a) a passion for educational leadership and (b) drive and determination. Internal barriers were comprised of (c) career doubt and (d) questioning of leadership capacity. External drivers were (e) family support and (f) mentors. External barriers consisted of (g) experiences with gender discrimination and (h) district resistance to change. Additionally, the theme of family influence and support had two additional emergent subthemes including (a) family members who were educators, and (b) supportive parents who were still married. Figure 1 illustrates the internal drivers and barriers described by the participants and Figure 2 illustrates the external drivers and barriers evident in principal interviews. Below each figure, each theme is explained in greater detail with supporting quotes provided to elucidate the principal participants' experiences in their own words.

Internal Drivers

- Passion for Educational Leadership
- Drive and Determination

Internal Barriers

- Career Doubt
- Leadership Capacity Questioned

Figure 1. Themes related to internal drivers and barriers.

Internal Drivers: Passion for Educational Leadership and Drive and Determination

All five participants described themselves as having a competitive nature or a strong desire to progress in their career, regardless of the obstacles. The participants articulated a passion for educational leadership and many shared instances in which they desire to expand their span of influence within school settings to impact positively larger groups of students and teachers. Phrases such as “I wanted to have a bigger impact” and “I can impact all kids” were used to express this sentiment. Most participants believed that they really wanted to influence systemic changes in education. Moreover, each respondent discussed an intrinsic drive for continual growth on an administrator career path. A passion for educational leadership was a pivotal factor for the principal participants when they described their decisions to take on administrative roles within the educational system hierarchy and move from positions as teachers to administrators. Principal Escobar expressed this sentiment:

As a teacher, you teach the kids that come into your room and leave. As a principal, you touch them all, and you can affect them in a positive way, and of course as a superintendent, it’s a greater extent. So that’s why for me it’s secondary education.

In regard to a passion for educational leadership and making a greater impact, Principal Diaz added:

I really thought that I would make a bigger impact with kids, but what I found is that I’m making an impact with teachers. So at the time when I decided that, I thought oh I’ll get to work with more kids. The reality is that I get to coach teachers.

Similarly, Principal Botero reported:

As a teacher, the principal had the opportunity to impact a lot more kids and the culture, I didn't think about it when I was a teacher. How you interact with other people, the kids, how you make decision about programs, a plan for staff development. All that is different than just having 22 kids in the classroom.

Another major internal driver was drive and determination. This was defined as the will to continue on a given path regardless of the obstacles. In this study, determination related to the inner resilience that participants described that allowed them to reach their current positions as secondary school principals. Principal Botero spoke about her determination as it related to challenges:

I like a challenge, I work really hard, I always try to do my very best job for whomever it is that I'm serving, because I'm serving my kids, the parents, knowing that I can help people. I've always been an overachiever.

In regard to the emergent theme of determination, Principal Diaz added that her internal competitive nature enhanced her ability to succeed:

I think it's just my competitive nature. When I do something, I just want to excel, like what's the final goal. So what kept me internally motivated was that it was a challenge, and I come from a big family and we all came out to be type A people, and so that just steeped into your internal drive and it's who you are.

Principal Chavez stated similar ideas about determination, "So I'm not quite sure if there's a next step for me, but as long as I'm determined and productive, it's all that matters." Overall, in their interview responses, the principals revisited periods in their careers when these two internal drivers served as substantial motivators for them in obtaining promotions and succeeding in secondary principal positions.

Internal Barriers: Career Doubt and Leadership Capacity Questioned

In regard to internal barriers, themes of self-doubt about their career capacity in the form of an *imposter syndrome* in which one believes that he or she does not really know what he or she is doing or are faking his or her abilities to carry out a role or function. Having their leadership capabilities challenged or questioned by others emerged frequently in participants' descriptions. The theme of career doubt manifested in several ways. For some participants, self-doubt about their capabilities and career choices as an educational leader was common. Sentiments such as, "I doubted my ability" or "Is this for me?" were relayed as common in times of stress or during role changes throughout their careers. Other participants doubted that they would pursue a career in education at all. Two of the participants cited instances where a subordinate questioned a decision, and that questioning led to an internal questioning of their own leadership acumen. Another candidate discussed how her boss continually questioned her decisions at the campus level, which led to self-doubt and her own insecurities about her leadership abilities. All of the respondents expressed that, over time, they developed "thick skin" and the ability to persevere through times when their leadership was questioned.

In seeking more in-depth information, each participant was asked to share the reason behind expressed career doubts. Principal Arias discussed her doubts in moving from the position of counselor to the role of assistant principal. She questioned her ability to handle some of the duties associated with discipline as it pertains to an assistant principal position.

Principal Arias stated:

It took a lot to jump from a counselor to an AP. It took a lot of interviews. It was the first time it took me so many interviews to get a job, usually any job I would interview I would get the job right away, but to go from counselor to AP, I think that was hard because I was seen as very green, or not able to make hard decisions and take in and discipline a student. So when I took the jump, I doubted myself.

According to the participants, career doubt manifested in a variety of ways. Although these doubts might have symbolized the respondents' internal struggles, they further described how they were able to persevere and continue on with their educational leadership careers.

The suburban principal participants also frequently described how their leadership was challenged by others and how this, in turn, led to them questioning their own leadership capacities. The principals described how they often reflected on their own leadership abilities in response to a perceived lack of trust from supervisors and colleagues who questioned their decisions as school leaders. Most of the participants discussed at least one instance when either a subordinate or supervisor questioned their decision making which, in turn, led to their own internal doubt or insecurity about their leadership abilities. For example, Principal Diaz stated:

When we received that big enrollment, we were doing fairly well with the scores, and then we had a major drop. She made it seem like it was my fault that it was a lack of leadership that we went backwards. There was no room to think that we were almost a whole new campus starting over. She kept comparing us to other campuses that did not look like us...so I was constantly having to explain myself and why I chose this certain program.

Additionally, Principal Botero discussed an instance when her leadership was questioned:

Having someone come attack your integrity, having people go to the board meeting and speak out because they don't agree with everything you do on your campus. Those are certainly barriers that do make you question your own leadership. There are some really difficult people to work with and it makes you question yourself.

Principal Chavez also indicated some internal struggles related to questioning her own leadership ability based on other people's responses to her being in a leadership position. She conveyed how, during the course of her career, she had worked in a district where she believed that students of color were treated unfairly. She described: "I dealt with a lot of prejudice there. Whenever the police officer came to haul off a student, whether Black or Latino/a, the officer made sure to take the kids while there were kids in the hallway so other kids would see." Her decisions, as the principal of that school, were so frequently questioned by district personnel,

parents, and other community members that the situation led her to resign from her position in response to criticism and pressure.

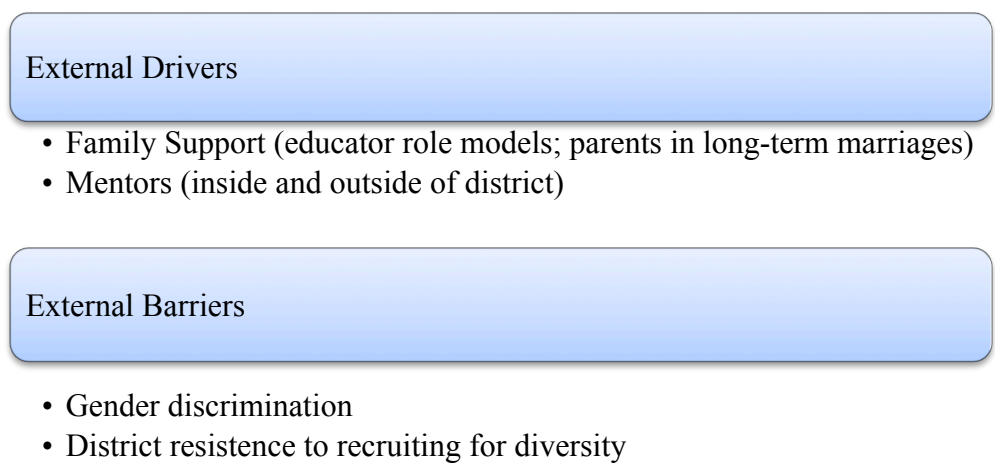


Figure 1. Themes related to external drivers and barriers.

External Drivers

Themes of family support, with a stable parental unit, and mentorship emerged in interpreting the participants externally related career drivers or motivators. All participants described how they had relationships with a mentor or mentors who helped them grow as educational leaders. Mentors were best defined as significant persons in the respondents' educational career that provided support, advice, and knowledge at no personal gain of their own. According to Magdaleno (2006), having quality mentorships is a necessity for aspiring Latino/a educational leaders. Only one participant mentioned having a Latino/a mentor. Another elaborated on how a female African American mentor had been pivotal in her leadership development. The remaining school leaders identified their mentors as older White males. Overall, the principal participants emphasized how mentors were an integral part of their growth as educational leaders. However, participants stressed that they would have greatly benefited from a Latino/a mentor who might have understood their culture-related struggles.

Within the theme of family support, common subthemes emerged related to the fact that nearly all of the participants mentioned having family members who were educators and parents who had been married for several years. Four out of the five participants stated that they had either immediate family members who were educators or were related to an educator in some form. Furthermore, these four participants shared that these educator role models were deciding factors in their pursuit for careers in education. Phrases such as "My dad was a principal" or "Everyone in my family was an educator" added credence to the importance of educator role models among the participants. Principal Botero indicated that her brother-in-law was a positive influence: "I had a brother-in-law that was an AP at [name] High School, who always told me I should get my master's. I was like nah, I really liked what I was doing, but I just went ahead and

did it.” All participants reported that they had stable homes and that their parents were still married at the time of the interviews.

External Barriers

Based on participant interviews, gender discrimination and district and school leaders’ resistance to change were cited as substantial barriers to the principals’ careers. Four out of the five participants in the study were women and, therefore, described some different career experiences than the one man participating. All four of the women indicated that they believed gender might have been a factor in how and when they acquired principal positions. They implied that being a woman hindered their ascension through the educational system, sometimes more than being Latino/a. They described trying to “break into” a male-dominated field in educational leadership. The female principals also expressed that they felt a greater need to demonstrate their abilities, especially in the realms of decision-making and discipline. The male participant did not report any obstacles related to gender. Principal Chavez described her experience and the implications of being a female in a male-dominated field:

My very first job as an administrator, there was a perception years ago in the 1990s that Latino/a females were always going to be submissive to males. I always had to work harder because I was a woman and a minority. I have to know two languages and I better know them good. I have to have my discipline down, I better be able to break up a fight and not have people say “oh she’s a woman, she’s going to get hurt.” Now days, women are all over the place but back then it was always questioned if we could do the hard core stuff or just the education part.

Additionally, Principal Arias shared her experiences as a woman in the field of educational leadership:

I think being a female has been difficult, and I don’t really see the fact that I’m a Latino/a as a barrier. It’s just being a female, becoming a leader or being in leadership, mentoring males, and possibly people that are older than you are, but over all I have found that just with reaching a level a respect with the people around you that it is easily overcome.

All participants described a type of resistance to change based that emanated from district policies and supervisors, particularly when proposing new procedures or strategies for recruiting more Latino/a teachers and school leaders or seeking ways to better support Latino/a students. Resistance to change has been defined as a systemic organizational process that reinforces the status quo and rejects change (Bolman & Deal, 2008). School district resistance to change was most salient in participants’ descriptions of their efforts to focus recruiting efforts to increase the number of Latino/a principals working in suburban districts. One participant described an incident where he proposed to the superintendent a hiring strategy for increasing the number of Latino/a administrators for his predominately Latino/a student campus. His superintendent then commented on how “most Latino/as were just not qualified.” Other participants expressed that their suburban districts did not have strategies focused on recruiting or training more Latino/a principals. Overall, however, participants agreed that focused recruiting was a needed strategy

for their schools, but that recruiting more Latino/a principals and teachers was not a district priority. The principals described how they experienced “push back” whenever suggestions of this nature were made. Principal Escobar described how his district was not willing to modify its recruiting efforts to identify and attract qualified Latino/a candidates:

One of the things I will tell you, it made my blood boil, I went to the superintendent that I wanted to hire more Latino/a teachers and administrators, we wanted to hire someone from [district] and I think she went to [district]. He told me that [Texas suburban town] wasn't a Latino/a friendly community. He told me that if I wanted to hire someone they had to be high quality and I thought, well “Why would I hire someone who wasn't?,” but that's usually the first thing in mind when you say Latino/a. I'm talking about interviewing people, not just going and hiring the first Latino/a I found.

For Principal Diaz, perceptions of resistance to change reflected a lack of support for the recruitment and promotion of Latino/a administrators occurred in both predominately White and African American school districts:

While central administration would not see this because they have too narrow of a focus, being Latino/a on this campus and having an AP that is fluent in Spanish has helped combat so many conflicts here. They will never know all the things that are taken care of here simply because I can walk in and have a conversation with parents in their own language. There aren't enough Latino/as in leadership roles. We wonder why Latino/as are so far behind, and African Americans are so behind. I'm only going to speak for Latino/as, because I'm not African American. Sometimes people just want someone to relate to. I don't believe that in this district, they have taken advantage of their Latino/a leaders.

Implications and Recommendations

Results from this study have several implications for school district recruitment, retention, and support of Latino/a school leaders. Additionally, recommendations for school leader preparation programs, as well as aspiring Latino/a principals are outlined. Ideally, studies of this nature can lead to more effective recruiting of Latino/a principals, as well as focused preparation and mentoring of school leaders to attend to systemic strategies for better supporting growing Latino/a student populations in suburban school districts.

Implications for School Districts

According to the Pew Hispanic Center (2014), Texas has the second largest Latino/a population in the nation, after California. Moreover, U.S. Census projections indicate a continued growth in the number of Latino/a families in public schools across the nation. Consequently, the need for Latino/a educational leaders in U.S. schools has been identified by scholars as one of the most pressing issues in current education reform (Aleman, 2009a). In particular, based on the results of this study, suburban school districts might increase the number of high quality Latino/a

secondary principals through focused recruitment efforts, mentoring programs, and networking support.

Recruitment. The findings of this study indicate a need to implement focused recruitment strategies to attract competent Latino/a educational leaders. The principals in this study stated that none of the suburban school districts they worked in had a strategic recruitment plan and that, in general, suggestions regarding diversification of administrators was met with resistance. Therefore, districts might benefit from acknowledging a need to provide their communities with culturally representative leadership and developing focused recruitment strategies. One recruitment strategy districts might employ involves specifically seeking out educators from universities that are considered Hispanic serving institutions. Job fairs also can be strategically held where potential Latino/a administrators might attend. Promotional aspects of educator recruitment and marketing could be targeted to attracting Latino/a applicants by ensuring photos are reflective of Latino people. In addition to identifying potential administrator candidates, district should examine their notions of organizational “fit,” as research has indicated that perceptions of “fit” often disadvantage administrators from minority groups (see I.P. Young et al., 2011). Pipeline approaches would also be a viable option for recruiting more Latino/a principals from teachers who might be aspiring to leadership positions in the district. However, this must be a conscious, strategic process as some studies have shown that the “tapping” approach taking to recruit administrators from the inside often favors some racial/ethnic groups while disadvantaging others.

Mentoring programs. Findings from this study suggest that quality mentors are essential to an educational leader’s development and career success. For people of color, formal mentoring programs have been shown to be particularly essential (Cruzeiro & Boone, 2009; Magdaleno, 2009; Nieto, 2006). Participants in this study believed that they would have benefited from having a Latino/a mentor who could relate to them culturally; however, most thought that mentorship in itself was important. In fact, all participants indicated that the White mentors they encountered were pivotal to their career success. Only one principal indicated that an African American female helped her navigate some of the barriers of educational leadership. On the one hand, this finding refutes the idea that Latino/a principals need Latino/a mentors. However, based on participants’ pioneering stories, very few other Latino/a principals who could have served as potential mentors even worked in the school districts where participants initiated their principal careers. Overall, the participants cited instances where key district leaders encouraged them to move forward and identified in them positive leadership traits. Consequently, participants were encouraged to pursue leadership opportunities and were able to reach their educational goals. Also, these mentors were sources of inspiration during difficult times and helped the principal participants persevere and learn to navigate political terrain.

Networking support. Participants did not mention specific circumstances in which mentors introduced them to key district personnel to further their careers. Out of the five participants in our study, four indicated a desire to advance their careers into the upper levels of administration. Participants wanted to become superintendents, assistant superintendents, and other high ranking leaders within the district hierarchy. Surprisingly, when asked who could provide opportunities and support for them to meet and interact with high level decision makers in the district, all of the participants indicated that no opportunities were available for that type of interaction. Furthermore, when participants themselves learned about the importance of self-promotion and relationship-building with district decision makers, all the principals stated that

they had learned this on their own. Considering the lack of Latino/a administrators in suburban districts, this absence of guidance in relationship building, networking, and access could be a key barrier to school leader development and promotion. When school districts assign mentors to Latino/a administrators, opportunities for social networking events could be a part of mentoring responsibilities. Opportunities to establish relationships and have direct links to decision making personnel within a district are pivotal to the success of aspiring Latino/a administrators who are unlikely to have the same opportunities to socialize in the same churches or social settings as White administrators who might live and work in the same community.

Implications for Leadership Preparation Programs

Participants admitted to several obstacles in their careers and described how they initially believed that they did not have the necessary skills to cope with various situations as principals. Specifically, participants indicated a desire for more skills in navigating district and campus politics and coping with subordinates who consistently challenged their leadership abilities. Most of their coping skills were acquired from consulting with and observing other administrators whom they trusted. Although these informal relationships were helpful, the need for educator preparation and district training focused on communication skills and handling difficult interpersonal situations was evident in this study. Instead, principals described how current district trainings primarily centered on programming, human resources, building maintenance, and other matters. These procedure-focused training programs do little to help school leaders develop awareness and skills in handling difficult people and situations. Specifically, Principal Chavez indicated that her lack of understanding of the political nature of her job led to her failure as a school administrator. Ultimately, she resigned from the job under pressure from the local community and without the support of the superintendent. Moreover, Principal Botero suggested that her transition from an urban school to an affluent suburban school was somewhat problematic due to her lack of understanding of the political structures within the district. This lack of knowledge and awareness of the underlying politics in a school district was noted as very disruptive for the participants.

Moreover, university leadership programs rarely explicitly address social justice issues in ways that raise the consciousness of all school leaders regarding the importance of diversity in school leadership. This sentiment has been shared by educational leadership scholars (see Lopez, Magdaleno, & Reis, 2006) and reaffirmed by the principal participants in this study. According to Lopez et al. (2006), this lack of social justice preparation in leadership development programs can hinder leadership growth in a diverse world because the field of educational administration traditionally has been based on a White male privileged perspective that does not address issues such as gender, race, ethnicity, and social status. Consequently, the Latino/a principal participants in this study often were surprised or ill-equipped in dealing with issues related to ethnicity and gender. Moreover, their district level supervisors might have benefitted from leadership education and training that could lead to greater awareness of the importance of cultural sensitivity and responsiveness in public school settings.

Implications for Latino/a Principals

Based on the results of this study, the need for formal mentorship programs such as CALSA was evident (Magdaleno, 2009). Some scholars suggest that Latino/a school leaders must create their own mentorship programs and seek to network outside of the conventional avenues of school districts and governmental agencies (Young et al., 2011). By creating opportunities in the Latino/a educational community, Latino/as can circumvent some of the barriers that LatCrit scholars such as Aleman (2009a) and Tate (1997) describe. Presently, few organizations, such as CALSA, exist to provide aspiring Latino/a educational leaders with networking opportunities for career growth. Moreover, the participants in this study suggested that Latino/a principals should seek out and become involved in professional organizations that might not specifically cater to the needs of minorities but offer chances to network and dialogue with other school leaders. Latino/a principals should be active in organizations such as the National Association of Secondary School Principals as a means to get their voices heard and network with other administrators. Moreover, Latino/a principals and administrators must take a proactive role in starting organizations and providing networking opportunities in each state with large Latino/a populations. In this way, Latino/a principals also can find a space to reach out to aspiring Latino/a leaders and mentor them in their educational careers.

Conclusions

The increased enrollment of Latino/a students continues in suburban districts throughout the United States (Pew Hispanic Center, 2011). Moreover, the need for more Latino/a/Latino administrators to serve as role models and advocate for the educational needs Latino/a students is a goal often associated with quality educational reform (Aleman, 2009a; Mendez-Morse, 2000). In this study, Latino/a principals with careers in suburban school districts were able to contribute to the knowledge base in educational leadership by expressing their career experiences and sharing the internal and external drivers and barriers to their success. Participants greatly stressed the need for not only Latino/a educational leaders, but for all school leaders to value the importance of ethnically representative leadership in schools and be willing to mentor the next generation of school principals and administrators.

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