

Article

# Counterstories about Leadership: A Latina School Principal's Experience from a Less Documented View in an Urban School Context

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Academic Editor: James Albright

Received: 11 November 2015; Accepted: 5 February 2016; Published: 25 February 2016

**Abstract:** Latina/o school leaders are receiving increasing visibility in research based on their representation in K-12 administrative ranks. However, even though they bring cultural knowledge in providing social and academic support to teachers, families, and especially students of color, their own experiences still reflect less documented histories and contributions because of challenges related to racial identity, racism, sexism, and other historically marginalizing emblems of identity, often invisible in the school leadership research and practice. This study highlights one Latina school leader in the National Latina/o Leadership Study and her experiences developing a professional and racial identity within urban school contexts. Employing Critical Race Theory and LatCrit Theory, this includes the following questions: (a) In what ways Latina/o school principals develop their professional and racial identity? and (b) How do Latina/o school principals negotiate these identities in the context of their schools? Findings reveal the development of a professional and racial identity amidst challenges related to White teachers' resistance in preparing students of color for successful experiences in schools.

**Keywords:** leadership and equity education; Latina/o leadership counterstories; culturally-responsive leadership

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## 1. Introduction

The Latino population, among youth in the U.S., has increased exponentially and at the current rate, they are projected to surpass African Americans as the largest minority group in the United States by 2020 [1,2]. While the rural population of Latinos has increased, Latinos who live and work in urban communities continue to grow [3]. As a consequence, the number of school-age Latinos has grown by 45 percent since the last 2000 census. However, the demographic representation among teachers has not seemed to follow. For example, only 15 percent of public school teachers and six percent of public school principals are Latinos as opposed to 82 percent of White teachers nationwide [4]. Even though Latina/o teachers and principals are not the only ones who can support the development of students and their families, it is not surprising that most often, Latina/o students lack representation, advocacy, and role-models that can inspire their success in schools.

There are more reports reflecting research about the Latinas/os, especially after 2004, when the Pew Research Center began to report on Hispanic trends. Following these efforts, the National Latina/o Leadership Project (NLLP), began collecting data and documenting the characteristics of

Latina/o school administrators in 2008. These school leaders reported that the majority of Latino school administrators were often female serving urban schools of more than 900 students in high-need areas, where the majority of students are of color, and receiving free or reduced lunch. These principals also indicated the importance of their role as meeting the socio-emotional needs of students and their families, and in being role-models and advocates [5,6]. However, there is still much to be learned about Latina/o leaders' growth in the K-12 administrative ranks, including their histories, contributions, and experiences with issues related to racial identity, racism, sexism, and other historically marginalizing emblems of identity, often undocumented and invisible in the school leadership research.

This study highlights one Latina school leader in the NLLP study whose experiences illustrate the challenges that one faces in relation to developing a professional and racial identity within urban school contexts. The study illustrates challenges related to racial issues in a school with a growing student diversity expanding upon the following inquiry:

- (a) In what ways Latina/o school principals develop their professional and racial identity? and
- (b) How do Latina/o school principals negotiate these identities in the context of their schools?

In urban schools where diversity meets adversity, it is significant to consider the challenges school principals face affecting the development of their professional identity. Their longevity and sustainability depends on the personal significance of developing a strong identity as a leader serving these schools, and in the case of Latina principals, a negotiation of race related issues as affecting the development of sustainable schools.

## 2. Urban Schools Challenges

The challenges of urban schools have been extensively documented [7–11], where urban schools have been depicted as “a factory for failure” [11]. Rist [11] (p. 38) is poignant in his stance, indicating that across the U.S., urban schools and its' classrooms “do not exist in a social, cultural, or political vacuum”. The author [11] contends that while serving the most needed communities, urban schools are subject to political forces that keep them impoverished of resources, with families and students captive to their neighborhoods, and replicating racial separations even within the school walls. The author reminds us that while White families drive by these schools on their way to suburban areas, they probably would not be sensitive to these schools. Rist [11] argues that urban schools perpetuate inequalities, where a majority of students of color receive fewer positive praises and many negative messages. Due to the characteristics of urban schools, some districts face several challenges including staffing classrooms with qualified educators [8,9]. Nonetheless, the NLLP survey showed that the majority of Latinas/os often chose to work in these same urban schools where they can impact change.

Aggravating the segregation of urban schools is the U.S.'s racial categories and race construction [12]. Race segregation is more evident when children raised in the U.S. are aware of racial differences from an early age—whether consciously or unconsciously, and are bombarded with depictions of negative examples for people of color that are often embedded with stereotypes and misinformation about particular racial groups [12]. Specifically in the case of Latinas/os, the media and the judicial system have also played its role in the construction of race among Spanish speakers. Court cases like *Independent School District v. Salvatierra* (1930) and *Hernandez v. State* (1930), illustrate how Mexicans and Spanish speakers were at times recognized as White while still experiencing segregation. In *Hernandez v. State* (1930), for example, Hernandez challenged the verdict to his indictment on the basis that Mexican Americans had been excluded from the grand jury and the petit jury. He claimed that other cases where Blacks were excluded from jury service resulted in a violation of due process and equal protection. However, the court ruled against him:

The court recognized only two classes as falling within the guarantee of the Fourteenth Amendment: the White race and the Black race. The court held that Mexican Americans are White people, and therefore, fall within the classification of the White race for purposes of the Fourteenth Amendment . . . since the juries that indicted and convicted the defendant

were composed of members of his race—white people—he had not been denied the equal protection of the laws [13] (p. 328).

Court cases are concrete examples of how Mexicans were treated and at the same time were not given the same privileges, power, and benefits of being White in the U.S. It is not surprising then, that Latinas/os continue to struggle with issues related to identity and racial classifications.

### 3. Latina/os and the Development of a Professional and Racial Identity

The development of a professional identity is perceived as essential as the development of competencies to perform in the workplace. The importance of professional identity for school leaders relates to research that values their role beyond the achievement of technical skills [14]. Professional identity, relates to competencies relate to values, beliefs, energy, and motivation in embracing a professional role [14–17]. Scribner and Crow (2012) [16] state that the value of professional identity has received less attention in research when compared to technocratic approaches. Here we argue that among school leaders of color, the professional identity is developed in close relation with the development of a racial identity.

Racial identity is defined as “one’s identification with a particular racial group” [18] and is usually described by models using typologies [19–21], orientations [22], or a linear path characterized by stages in racial identity development [20,23]. Elements of racial identity include ancestry, ethnicity, physical appearance, early socialization, and personal experiences [24]. Helms (1995) [25] (p. 3) argued that racial identity is often defined as one’s racial category (for example Black and White), but also stated that racial identity “refers to a sense of group or collective identity based on one’s *perception* that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group”. Given that racial identity models and theories have historically focused on Black and White identities [18], more work is needed to understand Latino racial identity.

Interestingly, Latinas/os, do not carry a binary sense of race, but a sense of multiple identities. For example, Latinas/os in the Caribbean are Black, while some Mexicans may identify as part of indigenous groups in America. Latinos are not focused on defining and “either/or” definition of race, but rather use “both/and” [26]. Latinas/os vary in racial backgrounds and national origins, have cultural dimensions that are different in traditions, rituals, and language, and are a very heterogeneous group [27–29]. 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.

In order to consider racial identity, it is important to recognize how Latinas/os would first counter the essentialization of the group and emphasize the diversity found within their communities, and different nationalities. Race and color play an important role in the identity and diversity among Latinas/os. These cultural dimensions arise from the influences of family, teachers, religion, geographic regions, life experiences, and language. Ferdman and Gallegos [22] for example, identified six levels of identity orientations. They recognized that within the Latina/o and general community, Latinas/os whose physical features connote Whiteness receive preference over those Latinos whose physical features do not. Physical features that are associated with Whiteness are still given preference over, and valued more than those Latinos who are darker and do not look White [30].

### 4. Latina/os in School Leadership

One area of research that reached momentum in the 1990s, but has slowed to a virtual stop is the topic of career mobility, barriers, and career paths among Latina school principals [31–36]. In exploring the professional and racial identity as affecting Latinas/os, we considered leadership practices [25,27,37,38], Latina/o leadership styles [39], and their commitment and motivation toward social justice leadership practices [27]. Particular to Latina/o leaders, is the use of competencies that enrich the relationships in school. Hernandez [27] found that leaders with a strong sense of Latina/o identity use competencies like language in their interactions with students and parents, promoting its value as an important link to cultural identity. In addition, race and skin color have and continue to

play an important historical role in the development of their identity. Some studies compared Latino school leaders to a White normative standard to identify differences in how Latinas/os develop their leadership [39,40]. These studies found that leadership behaviors of Latina/o principals presented unique qualities when compared to their White counterparts.

For this study, we also considered the intersectionality of race and gender among Latinas/os, which includes differences in female relationships towards others, like perceived added pressures to be a role model for members in the community and additional challenges with balancing work and life [26]. Of relevance is the intersectionality of being a women and a person of color. Some studies argued that Latinas have been raised to move into traditional roles of mothers and care givers [38,41,42]. Due to familial characteristics, other studies discussed the importance of Latina school leaders in finding mentoring and encouragement to enter the administrative ranks [41,43,44]. Mendez-Morse [13] found that Latinas serve as classroom teachers twice as long as Latinos before even consider applying for the principalship.

When observing the professional and racial identity of this study's Latina principal, we also considered observing the development of critical race and cultural consciousness. Gay and Kirkland [45] address the importance of developing critical race and cultural consciousness among educators, especially teachers serving racially diverse communities. The aforementioned authors indicate that culturally-responsive teaching is fundamental, especially in the delivery of programs. Cummins [46] in fact observed that even though programs are adopted with positive intent, programs alone do not alter the mindset of those delivering them, especially in relations between White teachers and students of color.

Critical race and cultural consciousness has been recognized as instrumental in preparing pre-service teachers [47], especially because critical and cultural consciousness may not necessarily be part of the pedagogy of a majority of practicing teachers who are currently 82 percent White according to recent National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reports (2013). These authors contend that when prompted to engage in issues of race, racism, ethnicity, or cultural diversity in education, pre-service teachers react by: deliberately not engaging; trying to silence the significance of the issue; divert, diffuse or undermine the importance of the topic; or engaging in benevolent liberalism without engaging in self-reflection to change practice.

## 5. Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory and Latina/o Critical Race Theory

This study employs critical race theory (CRT) and more specifically, Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit), which allows for exploring educators in school systems where there may be a replication of deficit-oriented practices. Critical race theory (CRT), its methods, and theoretical frameworks are finding their way to the field of education and educational administration [48–54]. CRT began through an intellectual movement of the 1970s, developed in response to the slow progress of civil rights litigation [49,55–57]. Taylor [58] (p. 122) argues that CRT “challenges the experience of Whites as the normative standard and grounds its conceptual framework in the distinctive experience of people of color” meaning that people of color, without being compared to other groups, can contribute to the body of research and knowledge. CRT is generally grounded in tenets to which most critical race theorists adhere:

- Racism is normal and a permanent fixture in American society, and, because it is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, appears both normal and natural to people in this culture and can be found in the education, political, economic, and social domains of this country;
- CRT grounds its conceptual framework in the distinctive experiences of people of color, and employs methods such as storytelling, family histories, testimonials, biographies, and parables, which capture the experiential knowledge of people of color;
- Interest convergence, designates the notion that changes working against racism occur only when Whites benefit, as well;
- CRT insists on a critique of liberalism and argues that, although the presence of racism is justification enough for mandated change across a region or country, they often lack the devices for such change;

- CRT scholars, in analyzing law and society, challenge historicism and insist on a historical reexamination of the law and recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color. This dual emphasis should, it is argued, give rise to the recognition that race is a social construction and that race is not connected to biological reality, but categorized and assigned when needed;
- CRT has a commitment to social justice and views the elimination of racism and sexism and the empowerment of those individuals who have historically been marginalized, as critical to its mission.

Latina/o Critical Theory, also known as LatCrit, has its roots in critical race theory. LatCrit specifically frames the challenges of Latinas/os. The theory is credited to early Chicana/o scholars, law professors, and activists, such as Leo Romero, Cruz Reynoso and Richard Delgado, and the Chicana/o students' movement. While LatCrit theory is considered an expansion of CRT, it does suggest moving beyond the black-white binary and identify issues of race and racism in groups that fall outside this binary classification. As such, those whose work is grounded in Latcrit theory challenge issues, such as immigration law, English-only policies, and programs that do not value the diversity found among Latinos. These theorists work against the essentializing of this population, and are concerned with the social justice of all Latinos [2]. As such, there is also a critical analysis of the need for frameworks that value cultural knowledge, people's histories, and Latina/o core values.

Epistemologically, CRT and LatCrit allows researchers to capture the perceptions of oppressed groups, and document stories from individuals that have been marginalized and silenced historically, respecting them as knowers and possessors of knowledge. LatCrit theorists also include considerations of identity among Latinas/os, particularly the ways in which labels have been assigned to this population and the ways in which the court have constructed such identity. Labels, such as *Chicano*, *Mexican*, *Hispanic*, *Latino*, and *Illegals*, are a few of the historical and presents-day designations that have and continue to be applied to U.S. Spanish-speaking individuals. These terms carry with them significant political, historical, and social implications in how U.S. Spanish speakers view themselves, others Spanish speakers, Whites, and understand the construction of race.

## 6. Counterstories as a Methodological Tool

Using LatCrit as the theoretical foundation of this study, critical race counterstories [54,59] of one Latina principal is develop as a method to observe how the participant reflected on the development of a professional and racial identity. Counterstorytelling is used here as a method that considers the complexity of race among Latinas/os. For the purpose of this study, counterstories reveal instances where Latinas/os are confronted by issues of leadership and race—that once reflected upon—turn into resolutions that add to the development of a professional and racial identity.

Solórzano [54] (p. 23) expands that within critical race theory, counterstorytelling “provides a tool to ‘counter’ deficit storytelling”, challenging the dominant discourse. Yosso (2006) [59] (p. 23), for example, used critical race counterstories to demystify the Chicana/o educational pipeline. In collecting data and analyzing it through counterstorytelling, Yosso recognized that scholars “offer a space to conduct and present research grounded in the experiences and knowledge of people of color”.

The participant illustrating the experiences of Latinas/os was selected from a pool of more than 280 principals in the National Latino Leadership Project (NLLP). The NLLP is a collaborative effort that grew out of the need to understand the experiences of Latina/o leaders. The NLLP believes that this holistic approach to conducting research on/with Latina/o leaders will serve to document the experiences of Latino school leaders and recognize the contributions that Latina/os can make to the leadership research. The NLLP is a longitudinal research project that explores the larger questions of the nature of Latina/o leadership, how Latina/o principals exercise their leadership, and the experiences that shape Latina/o leadership. Data collection for this participant consisted of in-depth interviews, observations, and analysis of documents.

The selection of the participant's critical race counterstory was made based due to her presenting the majority of characteristics analyzed by NLLP scholars. Common characteristics among NLLP participants included formal training, demonstrated success in school in their leadership role, critical



consciousness about gender and race, and principals serving changing demographics. Assumptions related to this research were present in the analysis, based both on our own experiences as a Latino principal a Latina teacher in international schools, and the racism that is commonly encountered by Latina/o principals as reported by NLLP participants serving K-12 schools [30]. This principal was also chosen because of the contrasting experiences she had growing up in an all Latino community to working, as a school leader, within a majority White community. This dichotomous experience serves as the basic of her counterstories and is where the themes for this paper are generated. After providing contextual information about where the participant works, the authors identify “developing critical race consciousness” as one major theme in the findings. This theme resulted from the change in context for the participant. The second theme that emerged from the data was related to gender challenges. The third theme is grounded her understanding of the role that critical race consciousness played in her own practice of leadership. The paper ends with a discussion section and implication for future research. The principal was given a pseudonym and school information is masked as to protect her identity. The urban city is defined as “Upper Midwest” for the purposes of this study. Generalizations are limited to similar participants in the same context and serving in similar contexts.

### 7. The Urban School Context of Debra Smith, Principal at Water’s Edge Elementary

In this section we describe Debra Smith’s experience growing up and becoming a principal in an urban school in Minnesota. Structured as a story/counterstory, Debra’s story is described from her upbringing to her current position as a principal. Debra is a 27-year veteran of public schools and has served in various capacities, from special education teacher to compliance officer for special education to principal. She is currently 50 years old, having served as a school principal for 12 years in an elementary school located in a Latino neighborhood of an urban city school district. The district is located in the Upper Midwest where Latinos are still in the minority, but where the number of Latina/o students are increasing every year.

Debra is the second daughter in a family of five girls and one boy in a well-established family in the U.S.-Mexico border urban city of El Paso, Texas. She attended an all-girls’ Catholic school and considered her childhood as building her identity as a Latina. She consider her story to reflect rich and deep roots in the Mexican culture. She began reflecting about race and discrimination growing up:

My identity is really strong in regard to who I am. I never felt discriminated growing up, even though my mom and I have had these conversations. She always felt discriminated against by her sisters-in-law because we always had more. We had a nice house, we had the good cars, we had the nice clothes, we went to private school, and my cousins were not able to have that kind of life.

Her father was a role-model in developing a financially stable family. She credited her father for being a visionary, and for preparing his children academically in private Catholic schools. Her father valued education as a “*ticket out of the barrio*”. Her father expressed the importance of breaking patterns of poverty:

So in relation to having a financially stable family, we always knew we were different, we were privileged. But that is because my parents constantly told us: You know, we work hard, and we got to be thankful for what have. This is how you [the children], will be out of the barrio. [Sigh], I knew he meant poverty was out there and I knew of it, even if I never really felt it.

Debra knew the significance of being different from the common belief of Mexicans as being dispossessed, without goals, aspirations, or success. She reflected:

I had talented girls as classmates. The girls that I graduated with are now judges, they are doctors, they are lawyers, they are principals—so that is the norm for me. It is not unusual to see successful Latinas in the southwestern part of the United States, in California, in Texas, and in New Mexico. There are a lot of professionals like us. We are not the token

minority. There is a lot of us out there. So I moved out of Texas with a very strong sense of self, not only from my family and school, but strong in terms of possibilities. My parents always said: “You can always be whatever you want to be as a woman!” I also believe schooling was a positive influence. I attended an all-girls school that taught us to be assertive, intelligent, and knowledgeable. That’s where I came from.

Debra’s family reflects how families are dispersed around the country, some of them who can be in states where Latinas/os are not the representative majority. Debra now lives in Upper Midwest, while one of her siblings lives in San Diego, another in Iowa, one in Oklahoma, and two remained in El Paso. Being from a family with strong ties in the Latina/o culture demonstrates the cultural wealth [59] of Mexican families who are often stigmatized by single stories of failure. Her example remind us that communities of color have aspirations and several added capitals, such as language, tight family structures, and resilience, as Yosso theorized. Debra’s stories of success are often undocumented, or less documented in the research literature.

### 8. Moving to Upper Midwest: Developing Critical Race Consciousness

Debra reflected on the cultural shift when moving to Upper Midwest. Gay and Kirkland [45] in fact asserted that self-reflection is paramount in the development of cultural and critical consciousness. Moving from a familial context, where traditional Latina/o families and their relatives create a safety net, to a very different cultural context provoke Debra to redefine her identity. The contrasting areas in the country remind us as scholars that racial discrimination is more pronounced where there is a mix of ethnic groups, which is the case in large urban areas. In addition, in predominantly White communities, discrimination is made more concrete in the lives of both children and adults of color. Debra exemplifies:

When I moved to Upper Midwest, I became so much more aware of who I was, or what I was—more than who I was. I remember walking with my ex-husband (who was Latino) into a restaurant and literally, people would just stare at us. I do not know long it took me to realize they were seeing me as different. I think the day I realized how people saw me different was when I was in a meeting and I looked around the table and everybody was blonde and blue-eyed except for me. Did I feel different? No, but we all knew.

If Debra and her husband as adults, felt affected by the attitudes of the locals in Upper Midwest, we wonder how new families of color, and especially their children moving to the same area were felt. Debra’s experience are reminders that confirm a pattern to recognize that only those with capitals from traditional middle or upper class are still valued [60]. Yosso [59] indicates that this view prevents the knowledge from people of color to be considered as significant.

### 9. Gender Challenges

Since the inquiry was focus on race identity, Debra did not necessarily expand much on gender issues. Nonetheless, Debra’s experiences portrayed a few challenges related to gender. For example, she moved to Upper Midwest because her husband was recruited to intern in the medical school in this urban area. This means that even though Debra had been a successful educator, she had to leave her teaching profession at another state, and had to wait to get her credentials until she could be considered for in-state tuition at a local university in Upper Midwest.

My ex-husband was accepted into medical school and for a year I was just in limbo because I wanted to attend graduate school but could not afford the out-of-state tuition. So I worked in the city schools as a speech and language pathologist and as a long-term substitute teacher until I gained my residency status in the state.

Common to dual-earning couples, she expresses the hardship for working women who trail their spouses [42]. She also interpreted her talent and skills modestly, and did not talk about her leadership

from a position of power. She was also humble about her knowledge and skills, when accepted to the university's program:

After that first year, the local university was actively recruiting based on affirmative action, and I got into the graduate school to pursue a degree in Communication Disorders. I did not know whether to be ashamed of the color of my skin that fit the type of student they were looking for, or to be happy about having the opportunity. What people do not know is that I had to meet the highest-grade requirement to be granted an interview after applying.

Some of these behaviors relate to a deference among Latinas, in an also male-dominant culture. However, it shows the difficulty faced by women transitioning toward more independent roles, and the pursuit for successful careers [35,61,62].

## 10. Water's Edge Elementary

Debra became the principal of Water's Edge Elementary in 1999. Water's Edge is part of a large urban school district in the West side with approximately 40,000 students. After 10 years of teaching within this same district, Debra was recruited as a principal at Water's Edge Elementary because of the rapidly changing demographics in the area school districts. For example, Water's Edge student body in 1989 was 52% White and 22% Latino. Ten years later the White student population had dropped to 27% and the Latino population had increase to 37%. At the time of data collection the school's population was represented by 88% students of color. The Elementary school where she was appointed to included (1) a large number of students below the poverty line; (2) a high concentration of students of color; (3) high numbers of English-language learners; and (4) high numbers of Latino students (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** School demographics at Water's Edge Elementary.

Total Number of Students	Percentages
Students of color	9% White; 27% Black; 16% Hmong; 36% Latino; 2% Native American
Students with free or reduced lunch	84%
English-language learners	50%
Total number of White teachers	81%
Teachers of color	19% (14% Asian and 5% Latino)
Administrative team	One Latina Administrator
	Math (3rd graders $N = 55$ )
	64% Proficient
Academic performance	Math (3rd graders $N = 55$ )
	71% Proficient

Debra seemed to understand student needs, especially students who are part of urban communities. She reflected on what it takes to understand poverty:

I have always been aware of the hierarchy of wealth and poverty. People in Upper Midwest do not know poverty like that. They do not know what it is to literally live in cardboard boxes. They are unable to get it and unless you travel to a Third World country, you do not get it. There is a lot of poverty out there that we cannot even fathom and so I know the experiences of Latina/o migrant families and their life struggles and their children's challenges. I wrestle with that a lot.

Debra also connected with students and families through language. Even though English language learners (ELL) were seen as deficient, she saw these students through an asset lens:

I am conscious when I am in public as a Latina school principal. I grew up in a bilingual home, I grew up speaking English as my first language because my parents insisted on



it, but we also spoke Spanish because that is the only way I could communicate with my grandparents. I see the value in being bilingual, I see the value in being trilingual. This same value set is not found among people here. Sometimes I feel constrained to use Spanish when I am in public because it will be misconstrued. I have to be careful because other people will take it differently and look at me differently. It is like you are always a billboard for your ethnic identity and if you are goofing around, there is a burden that your entire ethnic group will be labeled.

Especially in providing support for these students, Debra found herself advocating against negative teacher attitudes towards students needing the most support like ELLs. She wanted to change their mindset which was often voiced as: “Well if these kids would only . . . ” Or “Why don’t these kids just . . . ?” Truancy of migrant families’ children was indeed a challenge Debra had to negotiate with both families and teachers, as she understood why these families would take their children away for three weeks or more.

Despite these challenges, Debra was particularly attracted to the characteristics of the school’s surrounding community when she accepted the position. However, sometimes she was reminded that she was an outsider, especially by long-term community members:

Some people in the community remind me that I am not necessarily from here. That I was not part of the local Guadalupe Church, for example. So they do not necessarily treat me like their favorite daughter here. At the same time I was not dependent of any ties that would restrict me in my job. No one can say: “She got her job because of me.”

In addition, particular interactions with members of the community related to gender and race:

Sometimes people in this community challenge me. For example, my last name is not Hispanic because I carry my ex-husband’s last name. A few weeks ago, one Latino from this community asked: “Why do you still have that name? You need to get back to Flores, because it is like you are denying your culture.” First of all, he never even should have questioned my decision. It was a really interesting observation that women are subject to.

We recognized that community capital, in this context, is built over time as one becomes familiar with and has a willingness to reproduce the norms of the school and district [63]. Although Debra found comfort in her connection to the Spanish-speaking families in this city, she conveys that within her work setting in school and most particularly administrative meetings, this was not always the case:

At professional meetings I look around the table and I can see that I’m the only brown-eyed, brown-skinned person. I know that White professionals can be potentially barriers or allies to students depending on their behavior, so I like to be an observer; I like to figure it out and then make a choice. “Am I going to say something or I’m going to swallow my thoughts and digest them a bit and reflect, and then come back without being just reactive?”

Debra indicated she was experiencing a form of social isolation in mostly all White administrative staff meetings. In addition, Debra had an acute awareness about her surroundings in that she likes “to figure it out” things, which could be interpreted that she thoughtfully thinks about the group as a whole and whether there is enough trust to speak openly about her thoughts. However, we question if perhaps some individuals could be seeing this social isolation as a self-imposed silence, and not based on her administrative colleagues as a hegemonic group. She responded that her years as an administrator have taught her that she had to make a conscious decision about her actions at these professional district meetings:

Yes, I choose not to [react] because you learn right away that it’s a double whammy if I do not think about my actions. If you hear a White woman or man say something inappropriate at one of these meetings, it is not a big deal. If you are a Latina and say something inappropriate, then they are *really* (she emphasized this word) taken as stupid.

So I am worried about things like that. I do not want to ever misrepresent my race, and be someone who does not know what he or she is talking about because I think that happens way too easily. You can look at me and see who I am [Latina], right? I think people will make a judgment just by when they first see you—by what you look like. Hopefully once they get to know you, and once they have worked with you in a group, they will take you. I do not know how I want it prefaced this, but one has more credibility if, I hate to use this term, act more White; if you play the game, basically.

A critical analysis of this quote reveals several insights into Debra's counterstory. First, there is a fear that Debra would be judged more harshly than her White colleagues, which in her case, results in a self-imposed silence in relation to race negotiations. This form of institutional racism suggests that leaders of color have to be more diligent in their speech patterns more often than the majority leaders if they are to be seen as intelligent and thoughtful [59]. Debra also points to the heavy burden that many individuals of color encounter in the pressure to represent their entire race in the workplace. This pressure results from Debra being critically conscious about race.

### 11. Leadership and Critical Race Consciousness

Debra showed how race played a large role in her identity as a principal. She actively sought to understand race after moving to Upper Midwest. For example, while she felt that she should act White with her teachers, she also felt pressured to avoid denying her own heritage and color:

I never used to think about race, but I constantly think about it now. Because if I do not, someone will remind me. In our school we have one African American teacher, a social worker who is American Indian, and three Asian teachers (one is Vietnamese, one is Hmong, and one is Chinese). All the others are White. I am often reminded by the African American educator that if you do not recognize who you are, you are denying your heritage. I do not believe I deny my heritage, but I know that people of color would think that I do, if I behave in a certain way.

Debra struggled with the need to act White. Although most of the research related to the phenomenon of acting White is articulated in the context of African-American adolescents [47], not much has written about Latina/o school leaders and the pressure to act White within their professional work settings. Young and Laible [64] suggest that institutional racism, particularly organizational structures and individual behaviors, continues to favor Whites. One of the researchers pushed Debra to speak a bit more about what it meant to act White in her school setting. The example she provided related to the way in which she presented herself:

I am conscious of getting dressed in the hair, jewelry, clothing, down to the color of the lipstick I will wear! For example, last week there was a group of us who were at the Capitol speaking with senators. I actually wore nylons and my pearls, and subdued colors . . . . If I am considered a professional, I want to present myself as one.

Debra was describing what we analyzed as the process of developing critical race consciousness as part of her professional identity. To look like a professional, required Debra to place her ethnicity second to her outward appearance. These types of accommodations have not always existed for Debra, when she lived in the U.S. Southwest. In fact, it was by moving to Upper Midwest that Debra was finally convinced that racism existed in her current community and recognized a need to become more pro-active:

Well [long pause] I do not think I ever really believed how much racism or discrimination there was in Upper Midwest, but I see it a little bit more clearly now. I used to see life with rose-colored glasses, and as I get older and interact with more people, and get more politically involved, I can see instances where people encounter racism. I always wondered

why I did not feel it. I think as I interact with younger people in this area, I find that there is a lot [of racism] out there, but I just never applied it to me because I was in my own world doing what I needed to do.

There is innocence in Debra's voice when she speaks about realizing how much racism and discrimination exists in her current home state, the state where she serves as a school leader. Her involvement with political causes and her interactions with young students (and the future for her own two children) has created urgency for her to address issues of racism and discrimination with her own community and the state.

Debra's move to an all-White community from a community with 77 percent of Latinos in Texas has made her more conscious about issues of race and discrimination and about her own negotiations of race and gender. The state in which she currently works is now known to have one of the largest achievement gaps between White students and students of color [65]. She felt her professional identity corresponded to her desire to serve this community and the school:

I really need to be here. I bring a different perspective in the school operations. I come from a different perspective from the local middle class White expectation. I think it really helps when I can bring in my own self into a situation with the parents. My style is different and people do not understand me sometimes. I am often advocating for students. I sit here and say look, we have to consider this family because of this and that. I know a lot of people felt I got the position just because I was a minority. Since the district was actively recruiting, I did fight to get this position. But I refuse to give into the myth that I was only hired because I am a female or a Latina. I know that was not the case.

In establishing herself as a school principal, and an advocate for the community, Debra reflected on how important it was to make a difference. She reflected: "Why is it so hard for the White majority to accept the fact that there are smart people of color? There needs to be a place for us in this spectrum". She ended with remarks of much admiration for her own family role-models and how she aspired to make them proud through her contributions as a school leader.

## 12. Discussion

Debra's case illustrates some of the experiences of Latina principals. It describes the experiences of individuals growing up in racially safe environments, who have not had encounters with heterogeneous groups in their upbringing which may cultivate views of race discrimination. Nonetheless, even among Latinas/os, Debra describes class consciousness, due to her family's financial security, and more privileged upbringing.

Debra learned about discrimination after moving to Upper Midwest. When reflecting on Debra's experiences at a national context, we recognized the societal obsession with generalizing single stories about race and racial depictions of diverse groups as being most harmful to Latinas/os in the U.S. [1]. The most damaging social narratives are ones carried by the media in their depiction of "Latinos as lazy, criminal, dirty, happy-go-lucky, and uninterested in assuming the role of informed citizenship" [1] (p. 207) regardless of hardships and successes. Debra makes reference to these patterns and offers a counterstory to single stories about race. Debra's experiences also point to the aberrant nature of racism. According to tenets of CRT, racism has become an integral element of society that permeates education systems, criminal justice systems, and health care systems to name a few.

Recently, Latina/o identity have been associated closely with immigration in the media when generalizations make Latinas/os to be seen as "illegals" even if they were native to the land prior to colonization. More recently, comments from Donald Trump—a republican presidential candidate—have contributed to the detriment of Spanish speaking immigrants. Particularly, Trump spoke of these individuals as rapists and drug dealers. These are the messages that fuel social and the mainstream media and are embedded in the minds of young children and adolescents. These characterizations corrode the racial identity development of Latina/os across this country and psychologically affect how they view themselves, Whites, other Latinos, and racial issues [66]. It was

interesting to document Debra's counterstory immersing herself into a new context at Upper Midwest. She indicated how one is continuously reminded of difference to the point of feeling awkward or inadequate in primarily White urban areas. Even though both Debra and her husband were economically stable, and had high educational degrees, they were still made different in public spaces.

Debra talked just briefly about gender challenges. Nonetheless, her experience portrays commonalities with other Latina women [30], who makes several sacrifices in their pursuit of a successful leadership career. Her dedication to education is also reflective of her gender since her choice of serving public urban schools is also reflected in the findings from the NLLP study. The composition of urban schools in which Debra was a principal was also consistent with Ortiz's [36] work in her hallmark study of career patterns for women and individuals of color. Ortiz (1982) [36] found that most of Latina/o school administrators worked in schools with high concentration of students of color, serving poor students, and students whom English was not their first language. Ortiz's data reveals that school leaders of color are most often found leading other people of color in general, and students of color specifically. The author [36] also revealed that White men most often lead organizations and White women most often lead programs. This is also consistent in the teaching ranks. According to Monsivasis [62], 67 percent of Latina/o teachers worked in high poverty and overcrowded schools. Debra's case was a bit different, as she was confronted with a majority of White teachers. When analyzing these placements in work settings using CRT, one can conclude that it is both racism and sexism that can drive placement of school leaders to certain settings and in some cases, to more diverse settings.

When critically studying Debra's experience in challenging urban schools, with a group of teachers that did not seem to present the mindset necessary to support the increasing diversity of the student population and their academic needs, we questioned whether Debra was offered a fair working experience. At first glance, Latina/os may seem a good fit for the demographic changes in urban schools; however, the consistent placement of Latina/o school leaders in highly diverse schools becomes problematic for several reasons. First, there is a potential to pigeon-hole Latina/o school leaders in particular work settings, which results in the assumption that they are only qualified enough to work and lead other minorities. At a national level, principals of color are seen often working in high-need culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse schools [4]. Secondly, it systematically places Latina/o school leaders in the toughest schools with mostly underserved students, which can set them up for failure.

While Latina/o leaders have been educating culturally, linguistically, and economically-diverse students with high success [6,28], placement in high poverty and highly diverse school settings provides the potential of utilizing their skills in narrow ways, and restricting their promotion beyond the school level. This form of hegemony suggests that those with power can pass up and pass on the responsibility of educating diverse students to someone else. This would suggest that these leaders were hired to address the challenges of changing demographics, and, at the same time, meet the interests that White district administrators had in either not having to deal with the challenge or not required to work with such schools. In other words, landing Latino school leaders in highly diverse schools to work with highly diverse students, meets the interests of Whites leading the school district, hence interested convergence at work.

As we analyzed Debra's experiences, we consider the counter argument suggesting that diverse schools should employ diverse teachers and leaders, resulting in the school staff reflecting the student demographics. Still, this notion of matching Latina/o principals to high-need schools implies that other principals, or more specifically White principals can still provide less culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse students and their families. Avoidance of intergroup contact [67] relates to the notion that White people do not have close relationships with people of color because they just do not have an opportunity because of where they live, eat, shop, and work. If we continue to have Latina/o principals and other leaders of color work in high need schools, White school leaders can continue to argue that an opportunity to work in these schools do not exist for them. It also provides grounds for blaming leaders of color for the failure of these schools.

### 13. Implications for Future Research

This study provided the example of one culturally-rich case and an in-depth analysis of the development of professional and racial identities among Latinas. We learned that family and community assist with the development of racial and gender identity and these experiences lay a foundation for how Debra thought about her own leadership practice. Debra's counterstory also taught us that this foundation could be challenged based on context. Additionally, Debra's story has also provided us with one example of how these Latino leaders negotiate these identities in the context of school. But more work is needed to learn how microaggressions affect principals of color's leadership. The use of counterstorytelling to provide evidence of particular discourses illustrated the experiences of Latina leaders. This principal's counterstories were grounded in CRT and Latcrit theories [49,53,68–70]. Debra's experience provides the opportunity for further research inquiry on hegemonic dominance. Counterstories assisted us as scholars' interested in the contributions of leaders of color to the extent that the retelling withdraws from a rejection of all but one universal truth about school leadership.

Nonetheless, counterstorytelling and similar qualitative methods, such as *testimonios*, have been critiqued as not being objective enough for research. Critics have also suggested that CRT and Latcrit essentializes race in ways that treat all individuals of color the same. For theorists who utilize CRT and Latcrit, race is a salient issue that requires the non-essentialization of race. It is known that historically, Latinos, unlike other racialized groups, have faced race and racism in the form of English-only policies and issues related to immigration. While debate about research and method are important to research, we also are aware that these critiques continue to speak to research favoring privilege, which still exists in education—pointing to racially-biased research epistemologies [71].

### 14. Conclusions

In Delgado Bernal's [69] examination of Latina epistemology (more specifically Chicana epistemology), she emphasized the importance of giving voice to Latinas. In order to give voice to this under-researched population, she suggested the application of three important tenets: (a) addressing the lives and the knowledge of Latinas where they are the only ones who can speak, first-hand, about their experiences; (b) respecting their lives as different than other non-Latina or male experiences; and (c) the complexity of epistemologies of color as braided with issues of immigration status, bilingualism, gender roles, and religion.

We revealed less documented histories and contributions of a Latina portraying challenges related to racial identity, racism, sexism, and other historically marginalizing emblems of identity. Debra voiced the need for a space—a place for Latinas in respected fields like leadership—where Latinas/os can make authentic contributions to the betterment of students and society. Much more could have been unveiled in examining Latina school leaders, especially in relation to an awareness of oppression as it relates to class, sex, and race [27,72]. Latina principals like Debra contribute to the knowledge of social-justice leadership that is increasingly needed to disrupt discriminatory attitudes that do not contribute to improving the lives of future generations in U.S. society.

**Author Contributions:** The authors contributed equally to this submission. Frank Hernandez was involved in the data collection and Elizabeth Murakami coded the data for analysis and reporting. Both scholars jointly discussed the results and shaped the article submission.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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