

# *Lessons From Country Borders: Preparing Leaders for Social Justice and Diversity Through a District and University Partnership*

Elizabeth Murakami Ramalho  
Encarnacion Garza Jr.  
Betty Merchant  
University of Texas at San Antonio

**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this study was to explore the preparation of educators as school leaders in a master's degree program focused on diversity and social justice. This program is a partnership between the University of Texas at San Antonio and the San Antonio Independent School District. The program's proximity to the Mexican border provides an opportunity to examine permeable exchanges and accommodations where schools exist at the intersection of geography, culture, politics, and diversity (racial/ethnic and linguistic). The majority of educators in the program are Hispanic or African American, and they serve a population with a majority of Hispanic children. This study asked, "To what degree were the educators in this program being prepared as emerging leaders for social justice?" The cultural relevancy of who they are, as part of a distinct cultural fabric, is captured in the narratives of the educators as they prepare to become future educational leaders in this district-university partnership.

Our purpose in this study was to explore the preparation of school leaders in a master's degree program focused on diversity and social justice. The program involves a partnership between the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) and the San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD). The partnership, the Urban School Leaders Collaborative, has been nurtured, sustained, and studied longitudinally for the past 5 years, and it has enjoyed strong support from the former and present district superintendents as well as from the university's college of education (Garza, 2004; Garza, Barnett, Merchant, Shoho, & Smith, 2006; Garza & Merchant, 2005). The collaborative delivers a principal

preparation program and is now preparing its third generation of leaders.

An important feature of this professional development school (PDS) is its context. The program's proximity to the Mexican border provides an opportunity to examine permeable exchanges and accommodations where the school district exists at the intersection of geography, culture, politics, and diversity (racial/ethnic and linguistic). The location of the school district and university to the border between the United States and Mexico is significant because the cultural values of both countries permeate the lives and perceptions of the educators, students, and parents directly involved in these educational institutions.

The majority of educators in the program are Hispanic or African American, serving a population with a majority of Hispanic children. In this study, we asked, “To what degree were the educators in this program being prepared as emerging leaders for social justice?”

The cultural relevancy of who they are, as part of a distinct cultural fabric, is captured in the narratives of the educators as they prepare to become future educational leaders in this district–university partnership.

## Culturally Relevant Practices

Whereas the proportion of poor students and students of color in American public schools is increasing, the majority of their teachers are White, monolingual, middle-class women (Cochran-Smith, 2000). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2005), student enrollment in schools and colleges of education was 71,760,000 by 2004. Of these, 86.5% were White; 6.8% were African American; 2.7% were Latino; and the remaining percentages were of other racial and/or ethnic backgrounds. These figures illustrate that predominantly White higher education faculty are preparing predominantly White teachers to teach a growing population of public school students who are very different from them—racially, ethnically, linguistically, and economically. *Racial differences* refer to shared genetic heritages and physical characteristics, whereas *ethnic differences* refer to shared senses of identity and culture independent of racial differences. The teaching force is increasingly White (approximately 88%), whereas non-Whites compose more than 50% of the student population.

According to the Academic Excellence Indication System, student demographics in Texas are consistent with the national trends. Latinos represent 46.3% of the K–12 public school student population, followed by Whites (35.7%) and Blacks (14.4%). The teacher demographics differ from those of the student population in that they do not reflect the same

racial/ethnic representation. Sixty-nine percent of the teachers in Texas K–12 public schools are White, whereas only 21% are Latino and 9% are Black (Texas Education Agency, 2007).

These divergent demographics will not be drastically shifting any time soon. In fact, the data indicate that the Latino student population is growing at a faster pace than expected. In Texas, Latinos generally now constitute more than 50% of the population; they are the majority (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). The literature about effective schools indicates that principals play a major role in the academic success or failure of students (Garza, Reyes, & Trueba, 2004; Gonzales, 2002). Given the critical role of the principal, it is crucial that school leaders be prepared to meet the needs of Latino students (Gonzales, Huerta-Macias, & Tinajero, 2002; Lomotey, 1989), yet school principals lack specific knowledge and understanding of the educational needs of Latino students.

Even if schools are major social institutions and important centers of community activity, educators serving economically disadvantaged communities learn early in the program that the scholarly literature is rich with accounts about the plight and demise of Hispanic and African American students. Their achievement has been linked to a variety of sociocultural factors that are consistently based on a culturally deficient model (Cummins, 1989, 1997; Garza et al., 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Valencia, 1991; Valenzuela, 1999). To set the stage for critical thinking about social justice, the introductory question posed by one of the facilitators of the Urban School Leaders Collaborative (Garza, 2004) was “What is social injustice?”

The literature is replete with descriptions of the academic challenges facing students of color. For example, many studies have been conducted to explain why so many Hispanic students are failing in school (Valencia, 1991; Valenzuela, 1999). These children continue to be plagued with having the highest dropout rate, being misplaced and overrepresented in special education, being overage for their

grade level, and being underrepresented in gifted and talented and advanced placement programs (Cummins, 1989, 1997; Valencia, 1991). Their poor achievement has been consistently linked to a variety of sociocultural factors that propel Mexican American students into academic failure. The assumption underlying these findings is that Hispanic children do not have the necessary competencies, values, and personal characteristics to succeed in America's schools. According to a large body of research (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Payne, 1995; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997), their deficit has been attributed to their families, their neighborhoods, and the students themselves. This research has typically defined the students, their families, and their neighborhoods as *culturally deprived* or *disadvantaged*. As a result of these deficit-oriented definitions, public school systems have continued to design programs to remediate or compensate for these students' so-called deficiencies (Valencia, 1991). Using a therapeutic discourse, the educators running these programs commonly view the children as *po-brecitos* (poor little children) who need to be saved (Garza et al., 2004).

## The City and the District

San Antonio, Texas, is the fourth-fastest-growing city in the nation, with 1,296,682 inhabitants in 2007. It is located approximately 2 hours from the Mexican border. Its proximity to the border makes the city a culturally rich community, with a population that is 58% Latino. In this visitor-friendly city, English and Spanish are culturally blended languages, and they are current in the city's festivities, printed and visual media, and general public services. Nonetheless, part of the population does not speak Spanish, including people of Mexican descent. Thus, San Antonio presented itself for this study as an important context in which to observe the intersection of national and international exchange that includes geography, culture, politics, and diversity (racial/ethnic and linguistic).

The city's growth has brought with it societal changes common to urban centers. There has been an exodus of families to the suburbs. SAISD, one of the districts in the area, is located in the heart of the city. For the 2005–2006 academic year, its enrollment comprised 56,371 students. As such, disparities become noticeable through a careful demographic analysis of the district. In comparing SAISD with the demographics of the state of Texas, the district's ethnic composition is 90.0% Hispanic (compared to 45.3% in the state). The school district has a high percentage of students classified as *at risk* (67.5%, compared to 48.7% in the state), as well as a large group with limited-English proficiency (16.7%, compared to 15.8% in the state). Of greater concern is the large number of economically disadvantaged students (92.2%, compared to 55.6% in the state; Texas Education Agency, 2007). When compared to the entire state of Texas, SAISD deserves attention because it shows an authentic need for the investment of its children in terms of societal improvement and sustainability. The need for educational leaders who are committed to the district and who will act as social justice agents is evident owing to the high enrollment of Hispanic students and economically disadvantaged students.

The change in student demographics is perceived as an important variable to consider when preparing children in schools. School leaders have the greatest difficulty developing high-achieving schools in communities where the majority of students are of color and from low-income families (Reyes, Scribner, & Paredes Scribner, 1999). In south Texas, principals involved in educational institutions encounter students in widely contrasting situations of wealth and poverty. School leaders must therefore be better prepared to serve diverse communities, especially when considering that the Hispanic population will continue to grow at a phenomenal rate. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), the Hispanic population has grown 13 times faster than the White population, increasing to 33 million nationwide.

## The District–University Partnership

When the National Association for Professional Development Schools delineated the nine essentials of a PDS, it not only identified strong partnerships but provided a way to identify areas in need of improvement. The nine essentials include the following:

1. A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community;
2. A school–university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community;
3. Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need;
4. A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants;
5. Engagement in and public sharing of the results of deliberate investigations of practice by respective participants;
6. An articulation agreement developed by the respective participants delineating the roles and responsibilities of all involved;
7. A structure that allows all participants a forum for ongoing governance, reflection, and collaboration;
8. Work by college/university faculty and P–12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings; and
9. Dedicated and shared resources and formal rewards and recognition structures.<sup>1</sup>

Some PDS essentials were identified in this partnership. The first three essentials were articulated early, during the formation of the partnership. The superintendent’s mission at SAISD focused on building an exemplary urban school district. His initial meetings with the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies and the College of Ed-

ucation and Human Development conveyed his strong concerns. In face of the inner-city challenges, such as the demographical changes in the district and the evasion of families and educators to the suburbs, the superintendent voiced his concern in advancing the preparation of strong leaders who would partner in his mission to actively support this community. The literature confirms this concern in noting that universities throughout the nation are experiencing a critical shortage of qualified candidates for principal preparation programs (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Whitaker, 2003). Similar patterns were perceived at SAISD—especially, the departure of qualified educators and educational leaders to more affluent areas of the city.

The assistant superintendent believed that this PDS would help the district “identify the brightest and the best and prepare them to lead towards equity and social justice.” Both the superintendent and the assistant superintendent partnered with UTSA’s college of education and educational leadership department to build a needs-based preservice program that strongly focused on the sustainability of inner-city students and their families. UTSA and SAISD jointly designed a 2-year program to prepare emerging leaders in the district, with a master’s degree and with principal certification. The selection process was by appointment, with current district principals identifying potential leaders among the teachers, counselors, and instructional coordinators. The partnership would not only accommodate the preparation of emerging leaders in the district but also provide the tools for these educators to become experts in serving economically disadvantaged populations and English-learning populations. In fact, the purpose of the new PDS aligned with UTSA’s mission to “prepare educators to become transformational leaders who work effectively in diverse and challenging contexts.” The focus of the program would include equity, excellence, social justice, democracy, risk taking, and responsiveness to community needs—tenets included in the mission of the Department of Educational Leadership and

Policy Studies. Such strong commitment is important in the development of collaborative and responsive relationships with area schools and communities.<sup>2</sup>

The initiative was also based on the realization that the principalship has become much less attractive in recent years. There is an imminent shortage of knowledgeable administrators who are responsive to the unique needs of students and families, especially in school districts facing challenges related to sharp demographic changes and reduced chances for improvement and sustainability. Creative and less traditional models of delivery were then explored to make the principal preparation more attractive and effective. The program included five unique components: First, a philosophy of social justice advocacy drove the preparation program. The preparation focuses on attitudes and mindsets first, then skills. Second, a truly collaborative partnership was established: Both entities were actively engaged in the selection, planning, teaching, and evaluation processes. Third, a closed-cohort model was created in which only employees of the partnering school district would interact; preparation was customized to meet the needs of the children of this school district. Fourth, professors moved to the field. Specifically, all classes were held on campuses throughout the school district, and the students and professors created direct knowledge application channels, such as neighborhood meetings and increased community education. Fifth, the partnership network continued even after the students graduated and assumed leadership positions. This symbiotic relationship supported the improvement of district schools and the city. School districts understood the value of growing their own and so benefited by identifying and nurturing talent within their systems and universities. An important factor that helped to facilitate and negotiate this collaborative was the mutual trust and respect between university professors and district educators and their shared commitment to equity and social justice.

## Theoretical Framework and Methods

Social justice was significant in the academic preparation of the participants, but it was also an important element in a theoretical framework that included a critical analysis of culturally deficient models. As a theory that authentically applies in the field of educational leadership, social justice is slowly being developed in the new century (Anderson, 2002; Bogotch, 2002; Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Shoho, Merchant, & Lugg, in press; Theoharis, 2007)—specifically, by committed scholars who perceive the need to build a new social order (Lugg & Shoho, 2006) that includes a supportive network for the active role of school administrators as social justice agents (Capper et al., 2006; Merchant & Shoho, 2006).

Therefore, we used the horizontal dimensions (critical consciousness, knowledge, and skills) and vertical dimensions (curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment) suggested by Capper and colleagues (2006) to frame this study, with a focus on how critical consciousness became incorporated into the preparation of the emerging leaders in this university–school partnership. The context was a high consideration, given that the partnership was couched in border issues between the United States and Mexico. In sum, while learning about social justice and diversity, the educators in this program develop a deeper understanding of their experiences as well as those of their students.

Using Capper and colleagues' framework and a mixed methods approach, we explored the degree of critical cultural consciousness and social justice awareness in educators who were being prepared as emerging leaders in this geographical area. First, we used a survey to observe aspects of the framework's vertical dimension—namely, the curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment employed in the Urban School Leaders Collaborative. Second, we invited all three cohorts to participate in focus group conversations and to journal indi-

**Table 1.** Urban School Leaders Collaborative: Cohort Distribution by Gender and Ethnicity

|          | <i>Male</i> | <i>Female</i> | <i>Black</i> | <i>Latino</i> | <i>White</i> |
|----------|-------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| Cohort 1 | 2           | 12            | 3            | 8             | 3            |
| Cohort 2 | 6           | 8             | 3            | 9             | 3            |
| Cohort 3 | 2           | 10            | 2            | 9             | 1            |

vidual reflections. Table 1 shows the gender and ethnic composition of the emerging leaders ( $n = 40$ ) in the Urban School Leaders Collaborative.

The professional experience of these professionals ranged from 3 to 20-plus years. From Cohort 1 (which graduated in December 2004), 10 of the 14 students were campus instruction coordinators when they started the program, and 4 were teachers. At the beginning of this school year, 3 were promoted to administrative positions at their respective campuses. This was encouraging to other members because it showed that the superintendent was serious about the students' recruitment to administrative positions as they become available.

Evidencing the success modeled by the first cohort, Cohort 2 enrolled 2 campus instruction coordinators and 12 classroom teachers. In general, Cohort 2 was younger and thus less experienced. Early in the program, cohort members noted how bonding, collaboration, a safe environment, and affirmation were enhancing their self-assurance, self-monitoring, and personal adjustments. Cohort 2 graduated in December 2006, with 5 students being promoted to leadership roles (some of them even before graduation). At the time of this study, Cohort 3 was taking classes, with graduation projected for December 2008. Of the 12 members, the majority were teachers; 5 already held leadership positions in the district (1 vice principal, 2 campus instruction coordinators, and 2 administrative assistants).

Even though all the students worked at SAISD, most of them did not know each other at the beginning of the program. At its inception, the program was designed to prepare students through a mentoring structure, with principals recommending potential candidates

for the program. The design of the mentoring model was based on evidence suggesting that cohorts have advantages (Whitaker & Barnett, 1999) that extend beyond the graduate program, namely, by their building professional networks and altering other workplace behaviors (Muth & Barnett, 2001). In this case, mentoring was a strong component that allowed students to develop a level of comfort in authentic discussions about their racial identities and their goals as educational leaders. Not only were students' scholarship, reflective abilities, and group learning enhanced (Hill, 1995; Norton, 1995), but their interpersonal relationships improved, as evidenced by their collective sense of social bonding, cohesiveness, and community (Horn, 2001).

When the first and second cohort students graduated, they recommended future candidates for the program. The mentorship has continued throughout the three generations of cohorts, especially by means of the continual promotion of mentor-mentee interactions—including workplace visitations, internship opportunities, formal and informal forums, presentations at national conferences, and informal gatherings. These interactions promote a solid social network and an opportunity to create a trustworthy environment in which participants can share open and candid experiences. Of course, not all mentor-mentee configurations will present the same level of engagement. Nonetheless, the majority of interactions have proven to be conducive to personal and professional development.

### Evaluation of Program, Professional Development, and Mentoring Features

A descriptive survey was created to assess the emerging leaders' level of satisfaction in three important features: programmatic features, professional development features, and mentoring features. Programmatic features included whether students were cognizant of the collaborative association between UTSA and SAISD

and whether they found the setting, environment, and relationships conducive to learning. Professional development features concerned the alignment among the program, the district's mission (including demographic needs and social justice issues), and the students' personal and professional goals within the district. The mentoring features of the program included the engagement of participants both horizontally (with other colleagues) and vertically (with the collaborative-assigned mentors and other administrators in the program).

The survey consisted of 20 Likert-type items (5 = *strongly agree*, 1 = *strongly disagree*), with two subquestions (Items 21 and 22; 7 = *very satisfied*, 1 = *don't know*) designed to assess the overall quality of the program and the participants' overall satisfaction (see Appendixes A–C for survey items and statistics). The last question (Item 23) was open ended; it was designed to elicit participants' perceptions about how the Urban School Leaders Collaborative can improve to better serve the students, district, and UTSA. Twenty-two out of 40 participants responded to the questionnaire, resulting in a 55% survey response rate. Simple frequency and percentage distributions were used in treating the data. This procedure produced a reliable analysis. A weighted mean was used in analyzing the three important features of the program. The formula used to obtain the weighted mean was as follows:  $\sum fW/N$ , where  $f$  is the frequency,  $W$  is weight, and  $N$  is the total number of respondents.

### Evaluation of Critical Consciousness, Knowledge, and Skills

In the qualitative section of this study, students were invited to talk about the framework's horizontal dimensions of critical consciousness, knowledge, and practical skills. Students shared their perceptions by participating in focus groups and by journaling their reflections. We thematically analyzed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006) their narratives (Connelly & Clan-

dinin, 2006; Polkinghorne, 1995) to identify emerging commonalities across educators in all three cohorts, with respect to their plans as current and future educational leaders and advocates for social justice and diversity. The qualitative analysis considered the participants' accounts of their culturally relevant practices—especially, those related to the needs of families and students in the district. Because the emerging leaders were being prepared to examine social justice issues and practices geared to diverse populations, the analysis considered their perceptions of how their ethnicity influenced their mission, as well as their commitment to improving the preparation of the Hispanics.

### Findings

Based on the survey results, the PDS provided emerging leaders in the district with strong preparation. The survey revealed that, overall, the students were very satisfied with the quality of the program and the quality of their experiences; both had weighted means of 6.64. As mentioned earlier, the itemized survey questions reflected the students' perceptions in three areas related to the cohort members' preparation and growth: the programmatic features, the professional development features, and the mentoring features. The programmatic features evidenced whether the emerging leaders perceived the collaborative nature between UTSA and SAISD and whether the students found the setting, environment, and relationships as being conducive to learning. In sum, 95% of the students were satisfied with the programmatic features of the Urban School Leaders Collaborative. These findings were supported by the weighted mean of 4.57.

The professional development features reflected a fit between the program and the emerging leaders' personal and professional goals within the district. The survey showed that 90% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the professional development features were preparing them to better understand the complexities of the principalship, as

well as equipping them with the skills necessary for the job demands within the district. Most important, they acknowledged being more aware and committed to the district's mission to serve students with diverse backgrounds given that they were now more cognizant of social justice issues. These findings were attested by the weighted mean of 4.60.

The mentoring features revealed that 82% of the students agreed that the engagement with other cohort members and administrators in the district was conducive to their becoming more informed within the district and that it supported them throughout the program. These findings were reflected by the weighted mean of 4.38. Overall, the participants were very satisfied with the school leadership program, as revealed by the weighted mean of 4.52, based on the three features. The importance of the program's mentoring features was also evidenced in their journal reflections. One cohort member called her colleagues *co-hearts*, for example. Another student stated, "Whenever I have any issues I always know that there is someone I can call. I talk to the people that were in my cohort every once in a while." Another student wrote that she now had her "most special people who will do what they can to assist me, in addition to an entire network of professors that would do the same." These students relied on the mentoring component as a way to "commit to stay in closer contact." As one put it, "even if we never saw one another for years—we all know that each one is just a phone call away."

The findings derived from the focus group discussions and individual reflections further illustrated the richness of the educators' experiences in the PDS. In their reflections, the emerging leaders described their professional and personal transformations through their learning about leadership for social justice. Students thought that their progress through 2 years of graduate school provided them with much information about becoming educational leaders as well as about themselves (Kuyoth, Olvera-Cruz, & Rose, 2004). Not only did the knowledge gained from the discussions and reflections contribute to the development of each aspiring

school leader, but it also provided us with insight into the value of reflective practices as a tool for preparing students for their position as leaders for social justice.

As professors, we were responsible for setting the stage for critical thought about social justice. Students in Cohort 1, for example, cited how Dr. Garza, the program coordinator, facilitated critical reflection about social justice advocacy:

Dr. Garza models the fact that we must know ourselves before we can lead a group of students in a school. One of the major themes that he shared with us is social injustice. This can be an uncomfortable area to discuss, but Dr. Garza has a way of addressing it in a way that is thought provoking.

We identified four themes in our exploration of these teachers, who were being prepared as leaders for social justice and diversity in a leadership program that emphasized critical cultural consciousness and social justice awareness: social justice as a mission, recognition of diversity as a mission, sociolinguistic paradigm conflicts, and the influence of U.S. educational policies. We now discuss these themes in turn.

### Social Justice as a Mission

The students recognized that being part of a principal preparation program that focused on social justice was significant for their future career plans. As the National Association for Professional Development Schools highlighted, it was paramount to carry on a mission that advances equity within schools, as guided by a critical need to improve the students' opportunities in the district. The leaders' mission toward social justice permeated their associations, from theory to practice. "When I heard that the program focused on social justice, my antennae wiggled," stated one student, who decided to join the cohort mainly because of its focus on social justice. Another participant stated, "As an African American, I grew up living social justice, but that terminology is

uncommon outside of conversations with my father. So that really had my interest.”

The program interactions were safe places for students to reflect on their experiences. These opportunities were paramount in equipping them with the tools to bridge (Merchant & Shoho, 2006) who they were and their decision to adopt social justice as a mission toward equity and social justice efforts. Facing discrimination and translating it into social agency, for example, was harder when the educators had to confront their own racial identity. One of the students stated,

I had already come to the realization that schools were tools for assimilation into the mainstream society. My own experiences working in schools awakened me to the notion that education is packaged as a one-size-fits-all, and if it is too little or too big, it is the student's fault. As a female, trying on a garment of a one-size-fits-all, I can say that it feels awful when the garment does not fit. This same concept applied to education can have devastating effects on students.

The process of identifying personal experiences, voicing them in reflective practice in class discussions, and transforming these into agency was one of the ways in which cohort members acknowledged that the mission of social justice was already embedded in their experiences. Their lived experiences were strongly connected to their commitment to social justice, and their potential for social justice advocacy was evident in their reflections: “I know the meaning of suffering, and do whatever I can to help end it. Students misbehave in classes because they are dealing with issues no child or adult should have to experience,” stated one of the educators. “The program helped me to stand up for the people who are unable to speak for themselves,” affirmed another educator, “especially children who are unable to verbalize their troubles—that’s why I want to be a voice for them.” However, some cohort members were becoming aware that advocating for social justice was uncomfortable, difficult, and solitary. They knew that maintaining their commitment to social justice

would be under constant challenge, but they also knew that they could not turn back. This was evident when a student speaking on behalf of the group expressed the following:

We kind of came to the conclusion that we knew too much to go back . . . and that kind of stemmed from the fact that administrators go into the position idealistic and then all of a sudden something happens. We couldn’t define it, but we understood that because there were 14 of us and we are all working in the same district, there was no way that we could actually stray away from our vision or stray away from what’s right for kids without somebody calling us on it later on down the line. During reflection and some of the topics that we covered, there was always an opportunity to share what it was we believed in, but there is just no way that we can stray from doing what’s right.

### Diversity as a Mission

When the students discussed personal reflections while learning about the working terminology of societal behaviors and phenomena related to diversity issues, their beliefs became most conducive to being transformed into enacted agency. Capper and colleagues (2006) refer to this process as the development of critical consciousness (McKenzie et al., 2004): “a deep understanding of power relations and social construction including white privilege, heterosexism, poverty, misogyny, and ethnocentrism” (p. 213). These students were ready to reflect on their experiences and how they applied to practice. One student said,

Even growing up in Arizona, I can with complete certainty say that not one of my core teachers in secondary school was of any other race than White. In fact, the only time I had a Hispanic teacher was in Spanish class.

Revisiting personal experiences was powerful in revealing embedded social oppression. When further examining the awareness raised by the discussions, one student demon-

strated how she was cognitively organizing the information:

The cohort helped me realize what diversity as connected to social justice was. I was not aware of the term until the cohort began exploring the issue. I was not aware that I was an advocate until the class reflections brought it to my attention. So this in itself prepared me to be an advocate and activist. It gave method to my madness. I now have a justification for my cause.

A cohort member who had been educated in an international school during her family's military assignment in Europe realized that she had the opportunity to be raised in a culturally relevant school. "Why do not we provide the same opportunity to all students in the United States?" she asked. "We need to teach our children that diverse is good. We also need to stop subtracting from their identity. We should not require or make them assimilate."

Ethnicity was a prevalent issue in the cohort members' reflections; however, issues of gender and leadership permeated class conversations. The students reflected the important mission they carried, which included addressing gender and class divides. One student perceived herself as being prepared through self-discovery—"sometimes through painful reflection, to what it means to be a woman . . . leader . . . Latina leader!"

### Sociolinguistic Paradigm Conflicts

Investigations and analysis of school practices were part of the educators' experiences throughout the program. For example, the educators focused on a sociolinguistic paradigm conflict, depending on the side of the U.S.–Mexico border on which their work and that of their students were being evaluated. They recognized that many of their students, who were considered academically successful in Mexico, were viewed as being academically deficient in the United States, particularly if they were economically challenged. "I see Spanish-speaking immigrants classified as mentally retarded because they do not speak

English," reflected one of the students. Cohort members identified with the concept of subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999), both in their own experience and in the experiences of their students. One student shared her middle school experience:

When I got into a new school after the age of 12, I was being singled out. I was told to return across the Rio Grande. I had never even heard of the Rio Grande. So I asked my father what that meant. I recall that day very well, for it would be the day that I would be stereotyped and made to assimilate into the White way of life. I was deprived of my culture in school. It was bad to speak Spanish. I learned the English language at the expense of losing my own identity. I was being asked to no longer be proud to be a Mexican American.

Many shared the experience of working hard to change their names in school (from Juan to John, e.g.), and they mentioned their parents' effort not to speak Spanish at home, upon their teachers' suggestion. Nonetheless, cohorts perceived the notion of subtractive schooling when they realized that their schools were erasing their culture and identity; they also realized that no matter how much they tried, others would still determine where one belongs based on race or gender. One of the cohort members, who was attending classes to complete her second master's degree, shared that because she was a daughter of migrant workers, counselors would often place her in remedial classes based on perceived ethnic and language characteristics:

A counselor believed I could never catch up with my work. He would say, "Honey, we are doing you a favor by placing you in easier classes. . . . We have students who are already failing some of those hard courses you want to take, and they are not even migrant students." This experience soon prompted me to grow cynicism towards the word *caring*. My migrant life had taught me good lessons on how to fight for what was right. Often, I had dealt with housing, employment, and gender discrimination issues on behalf of

my family. Anyhow, I would persist, and with the help of some of my teachers I would end up getting the courses I requested: physics, computer science, and other college preparation courses.

As an educator, one student encountered barriers to improving students' academic lives owing to the low expectations held by educators and administrators:

I remember the last class that I taught as a classroom teacher. I had 16 students, but they were 16 who were considered to be the worst behaved and to have the least going for them. They were the ones "bringing down" the fourth grade's data. My students were a mixture of African American and Mexican American students. They were so accustomed to people viewing them with low expectations that the despair in the room could be cut with a knife. My first question to them on the 1st day of school was "Who wants to have a successful year?" They looked at me with such disdain that I wanted to cry. What made my year the most challenging of my career was that the vice principal never believed these students could show improvement. She would watch me and the students closer to confirm her expectations of failure.

Cohort members recognized that, according to the perception, language was valuable only when it was disconnected from family or cultural background. For instance, one of the teachers noticed that while her district (perceived as being poor) struggled for state and federal funds to improve language learning, the neighboring district (in an affluent part of the city) presented the same language programs as a curricular enrichment. To this a cohort member asked, "How can 'remedial' be perceived as 'enrichment' just a couple of blocks away in the same county?"

"The same way we are now being required to learn Spanish to serve the families in the district," exclaimed another.

As these members were preparing for the principalship, their supervisors in the district were suggesting that to better serve families in the district, they needed to speak Spanish.

What these emerging leaders were demonstrating was that their remedial schooling experience meant only to merge them into a place being defined for them (Valencia, 1991; Valenzuela, 1999). That place never included the possibility of these participants' becoming educational leaders equipped with sophisticated academic and professional skills, which now included the necessary language enrichment to better serve students and their families.

One of the partnership activities included neighborhood visits. In the School and Community Relations class, the educators were charged with organizing a neighborhood meeting—the purpose of which was to educate parents about new school practices and the general expectations of students. In some instances, the educators encountered resistance from the school administrators but were able to build a remarkable connection with parents who did not often attend meetings organized in the schools.

## The Influence of U.S. Educational Policies

Texas continues to be the scene of contentious debate at the senate level regarding bilingual education. Through this PDS, the emerging leaders in this program were confronted with social justice knowledge that included the notion that policies, once perceived as being mandated and thus followed, needed to be thoroughly and critically analyzed at the district, state, and national levels before being put into practice. Some of the difficulties encountered by these educators when growing up occurred at the state and national levels. For example, the educators (some of them bilingual) recognized that even within the state, things change the farther one goes from the border: Language policies become more hegemonic; bilingualism is less valued; and educators tend to feel less confident about their language skills and their ability to help students from multiple languages and cultures. Rather than being viewed as a rich asset, bilingualism becomes tainted with biases that associate foreign languages with ignorance and poverty (Valencia & Solorzano, 1997). The prepara-

tion of students through critical consciousness invoked a deeper understanding of restrictive political movements in relation to power relations and perpetuated social constructions. After realizing the “way that the education system is made to address the needs of the masses,” one of the students became well versed in policies for bilingual, gifted/talented, and special education students. She stated, “I became a resource person on my campus. After only a year and half teaching, I became the lead bilingual expert.” Another student stated,

I began to get more involved in the politics that surround our education system. It is amazing how many cases were supported one decade and then interpreted in an entirely different fashion the next decade. Each and every person needs to become educated on what is happening in American schools today. Policies are implemented onto the school system from the top down. We live in a country where we vote for our representatives, laws, and have freedom of speech, yet we find ourselves voiceless and simply living our lives in a “just get by” state of mind. Educators and parents as a nation cannot allow children to be raised on the belief that they are not intelligent enough to have high aspirations, especially when these children are evaluated only on the basis of placement decisions that may not be accurate, scores and state mandated tests, and other tracking systems.

As emerging leaders, cohort members identified a disconnect between people’s needs and the political process of adopting policies that are generic and that neglect minority issues. The participants were now aware that the minority–majority paradigm was quickly changing but that the policies were not necessarily following such a progression of events. As one student stated, “some people do not realize that education should not look the same as it did 20 years ago. We should keep evolving for the sake of the kids.”

“*Sí, se puede* [Yes, we can] is not just a chant Mexicans say but a statement that things can get done,” stated one of the cohort members. *Sí, se puede* is related to the advocacy necessary to creating culturally relevant

opportunities in the classroom, to becoming leaders in providing a safe environment for students, and to fighting for higher educational opportunities for students, their parents, and other educators at the local and national levels. “Becoming an administrator is just the beginning,” stated the same student. She continued,

It will open new doors into a world yearning for change. People are becoming more involved in politics, education, and social justice. People are voicing their concerns and letting others know that we need a change in our children’s education. We will no longer sit back and tell the students, “It’s over,” “Who cares?” “You won’t succeed.” The reality is . . . people care. They are now willing to put everything on the line for change. Others who can’t are showing their support by going out to the polls and voting. Everyone knows that if things are to improve, we must change and focus on the students’ future so we can prepare them for college and beyond. I say this because doors are opening, yet people are ill prepared to handle such positions. This is why I feel becoming an administrator will give me the ability to fight for the opportunities that will allow others to put change into a reality. It will not be just “let’s talk about this or that.”

Cohort members found it difficult to extend their personal issues into possibilities to intervene in the state and national spheres. Nonetheless, the participants were able to identify whether senate representatives needed to carry similar culturally relevant philosophies that the students believed were significant to change the culture of assimilation into a culture of integration. As teachers, some cohort members admitted being averse to political implications and so recognized teachers’ resistance to change.

## Discussion

The consolidation and sustainability of a PDS is no easy task. Each of the nine essentials evidences the complexity involved in such

partnerships. We focused on just a few of the important aspects of creating and sustaining strong district–university partnerships. In this study, we observed the degree of critical cultural consciousness and social justice awareness in educators who are being prepared as emerging leaders around the U.S.–Mexico border, where much investment is needed in the improvement of students and schools.

Social justice becomes a significant issue only when schools as public assets fail to deliver the same promise of quality education to every child (Connell, 1993; Miller, 1999; Tyler, 1997). People care about social justice or injustice when they are motivated to break social rules or improve the lives of others (Theoharis, 2007; Tyler, 1997). The program participants were learning the meaning of social justice by working with students in an urban area facing decreasing enrollment and a number of inner-city problems, such as children who are being raised by relatives, high mobility, and gang activity. These educators continued the discussion of their commitment to social justice throughout other formal and informal conversations promoted within the program. The participants carried out social justice as a mission with respect to overseeing instruction (Delpit, 1995; Valencia, 1991), relating to the community (Valencia & Solorzano, 1997), and identifying political implications (Freire, 1985) as they prepared to disrupt and alter institutional arrangements that prevented students from being respected through equity, equality, and fairness (Gerwitz, 1998; Goldfarb & Grinberg, 2002; Theoharis, 2007).

Most important, however, the participants were fighting against their own biased perceptions of schooling. As emerging leaders, they had to come to terms with their own schooling, especially if their home language had been eradicated during their academic years. As aspiring school administrators, they were now being advised by their colleagues and mentors that their chances of obtaining an administrative position in the area would be substantially less if they were not able to speak Spanish.

The lessons in this study included concrete examples of a district–university partnership as a PDS that prepares educators to embrace a mission and actively engage in promoting so-

cial justice in schools. Once in the cohort, these educators are charged to mentor the next generation of leaders, creating an ongoing cycle of professional development, reflective practices, and collaboration. The connection between the emerging leaders' experience and their mission was significant.

As facilitators in the program, we recognized that important improvements in the PDS still needed to be revisited. Even though the university shared the same mission and advocacy for social justice, we were not involved in formal roles in the district. Our involvement was restricted to developing research on a number of fronts within the district activities and attending meetings with principals and campus instruction coordinators. However, the educators needed to see the professors in the district, and they needed to receive instruction from some of the district officers for some of the master's courses, catering the pedagogy to the use of district examples to expand the educators' understanding of the administrative activities within the district. The educators were more visible within the district when engaging in community activities such as the neighborhood meetings, and they were recognized by the superintendent's office for their performances. As the assistant superintendent envisioned, these educators were given the affidavit to further explore their leadership potential. An important lesson that can be transferred to educators is that social justice advocacy will in most cases be confronted by the same forces that once convinced students (some of whom became educators) that they could not learn and were therefore unworthy of academic investments. It is of utmost importance to sustain PDSs. We carried a similar duty as researchers and university instructors: We constantly reexamined our pedagogy and closely involved ourselves into the real work of schools. We continue to hold our sessions in the district, with professors engaging within a context-based PDS in a relationship that is moving to its fourth generation of leaders. Thus, in being consistent with our intention of preparing social justice advocates, we believed that it was imperative that we join our students in the field and become actively engaged in the school improvement process. <sup>SUP</sup>

## Appendix A. Urban School Leaders Collaborative—Survey Results

| Features   | SD    |       |       |       | DA    |       |       |       | U     |       |       |       | A     |       |       |       | SA    |       |  |  | Weighted Mean | VI        |            |      |    |
|--|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--|--|---------------|-----------|------------|------|----|
|  | n (%) |  |  |               |           |            |      |    |
| Programmatic   |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |  |  |               |           |            |      |    |
| 1. Collaboration between UTSA and the school district is evident.  |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |  |  | 3 (13.64)     | 9 (40.91) | 10 (45.45) | 4.32 | A  |
| 2. The program coordinator provides timely and complete information about the program, its nature, objectives, requirements, and expectations. |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |  |  | 1 (4.55)      | 6 (27.27) | 15 (68.18) | 4.63 | SA |
| 3. The UTSA and district staff are helpful in responding to my concerns and questions about the program.                                       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |  |  | 1 (4.55)      | 5 (22.72) | 16 (72.73) | 4.68 | SA |
| 4. Learning resources such as library and computers are adequately available to meet and finish the program degree requirement on time.        |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |  |  | 2 (9.09)      | 6 (27.27) | 13 (59.09) | 3.82 | A  |
| 5. The required courses in the program are offered at the most convenient time to the majority of the students in the program.                 |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |  |  | 3 (13.64)     | 7 (31.82) | 15 (68.18) | 4.68 | SA |
| 6. The combination of university and district practitioners was constructive and timely in improving my knowledge.                             |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |  |  | 3 (13.64)     | 4 (18.18) | 15 (68.18) | 4.55 | SA |
| 7. Guidance and support to students are regularly provided from faculty and staff.   |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |  |  | 1 (4.55)      | 5 (22.72) | 17 (77.27) | 4.77 | SA |
| 8. There is a positive relationship and interaction with other graduate students in the program  |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |  |  | 1 (4.55)      | 3 (13.64) | 18 (81.82) | 4.77 | SA |
| 9. There is a positive relationship and interaction between faculty and students in the program.   |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |  |  | 1 (4.55)      | 2 (9.09)  | 20 (90.91) | 4.91 | SA |
| Subtotal 1–9   |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |  |  |               |           |            |      |    |
| Professional Development   |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |  |  |               |           |            |      |    |
| 10. Educational experiences in my degree program are relevant, both in my personal and career goals.   |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |  |  | 1 (4.55)      | 4 (18.18) | 17 (77.27) | 4.68 | SA |
| 11. I can perceive my own learning and growth from the courses I have taken in the degree program.   |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |  |  |               | 5 (22.72) | 17 (77.27) | 4.77 | SA |
| 12. I gained better understanding and knowledge to meet the complexities of my work  |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |  |  | 1 (4.55)      | 3 (13.64) | 18 (81.82) | 4.77 | SA |
| 13. The program has equipped me with the instructional leadership skills and sound assessment practices to cope with the demands of my work.   |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |       |  |  | 3 (13.64)     | 6 (27.27) | 13 (59.09) | 4.45 | A  |

(continued)

| Features  | SD       |       |       |       |           | DA    |       |       | U         |       | A     |       | SA         |      | Weighted Mean | VI |
|---|----------|-------|-------|-------|-----------|-------|-------|-------|-----------|-------|-------|-------|------------|------|---------------|----|
|   | n (%)    | n (%) | n (%) | n (%) | n (%)     | n (%) | n (%) | n (%) | n (%)     | n (%) | n (%) | n (%) | n (%)      |      |               |    |
| 14. I became more aware of social justice issues through the district concerns and needs.   | 1 (4.55) |       |       |       | 2 (9.09)  |       |       |       | 3 (13.64) |       |       |       | 16 (72.73) | 4.50 | SA            |    |
| 15. I became more aware of the district's mission to serve students with diverse backgrounds and needs.                                       |          |       |       |       | 3 (13.64) |       |       |       | 7 (31.82) |       |       |       | 12 (54.54) | 4.41 | A             |    |
| 16. The program has nurtured me to have a strong sense of commitment to improving student achievement.  |          |       |       |       | 2 (9.09)  |       |       |       | 3 (13.64) |       |       |       | 17 (77.72) | 4.68 | SA            |    |
| 17. After taking the courses, I developed a deeper sense of commitment to the school I work in, as well as the district goals and objectives. | 1 (4.55) |       |       |       | 1 (4.55)  |       |       |       | 2 (9.09)  |       |       |       | 17 (77.72) | 4.50 | SA            |    |
| Subtotal 10-17  |          |       |       |       |           |       |       |       |           |       |       |       |            | 4.60 | SA            |    |
| Mentoring   |          |       |       |       |           |       |       |       |           |       |       |       |            |      |               |    |
| 18. Mentoring and being mentored helped me in knowing more about the district and the schools in the district.                                |          |       |       |       | 2 (9.09)  |       |       |       | 6 (27.27) |       |       |       | 10 (45.45) | 4.23 | A             |    |
| 19. Mentoring and being mentored encouraged me to be more engaged in the program.   | 1 (4.55) |       |       |       | 3 (13.64) |       |       |       | 9 (40.91) |       |       |       | 9 (40.91)  | 4.14 | A             |    |
| 20. The program should be continued and supported to develop instructional leaders.   |          |       |       |       |           |       |       |       | 1 (4.55)  |       |       |       | 21 (95.45) | 4.77 | SA            |    |
| Subtotal 18-20  |          |       |       |       |           |       |       |       |           |       |       |       |            | 4.38 | A             |    |
| Total 1-20  |          |       |       |       |           |       |       |       |           |       |       |       |            | 4.52 | SA            |    |

Note. Likert-type scale used for Questions 1-20: 5 = *strongly agree* (SA); 4 = *agree* (A); 3 = *undecided* (U); 2 = *disagree* (DA); 1 = *strongly disagree* (SD). VI = verbal interpretation.

| Overall Level of Satisfaction   | VS         |       |       | S         |       | SS    |          | Weighted Mean | VI |
|---|------------|-------|-------|-----------|-------|-------|----------|---------------|----|
|   | n (%)      | n (%) | n (%) | n (%)     | n (%) | n (%) |          |               |    |
| 21. How would you rate your satisfaction with the overall quality of the program?                         | 15 (68.18) |       |       | 6 (27.27) |       |       | 1 (4.55) | 6.64          | VS |
| 22. How would you rate your overall satisfaction with your experiences as a member of the cohort program? | 15 (68.18) |       |       | 6 (27.27) |       |       | 1 (4.55) | 6.64          | VS |
| Total   |            |       |       |           |       |       |          | 6.64          | VS |

Note. VS = very satisfied; S = satisfied; SS = somewhat satisfied; VI = verbal interpretation. Note that no respondent indicated *somewhat dissatisfied*, *dissatisfied*, *very dissatisfied*, or *don't know*.

## Appendix B. Rating Scale for the Analysis and Verbal Interpretation of Items 1–20

| Range     | Verbal Interpretation |
|-----------|-----------------------|
| 4.50–5.00 | Strongly agree        |
| 3.50–4.49 | Agree                 |
| 2.50–3.49 | Undecided             |
| 1.50–2.49 | Disagree              |
| 1.00–1.49 | Strongly disagree     |

## Appendix C. Calculated Weighted Mean for the Analysis and Verbal Interpretation of Items 21 and 22

| Range     | Verbal Interpretation |
|-----------|-----------------------|
| 6.50–7.00 | Very satisfied        |
| 5.50–6.49 | Satisfied             |
| 4.50–5.49 | Somewhat satisfied    |
| 3.50–4.49 | Somewhat dissatisfied |
| 2.50–3.49 | Dissatisfied          |
| 1.50–2.49 | Very dissatisfied     |
| 1.00–1.49 | Don't know            |

## Notes

1. See [http://www.napds.org/nine\\_essen.html](http://www.napds.org/nine_essen.html).
2. See <http://elps.utsa.edu/admin/mission.htm>.

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**Elizabeth Murakami Ramalho** is an assistant professor in educational leadership and policy studies at University of Texas–San Antonio. She teaches graduate-level courses in school

leadership, applied research, school change, and principal preparation in urban areas, with an emphasis in the promotion of learning communities. Her research focuses on urban and international educational leadership, including organizational learning and ecology, leadership dynamics, hybrid identities and communities, social justice, race, and gender.

**Encarnacion Garza Jr.** is an assistant professor in educational leadership and policy studies at University of Texas–San Antonio. He has been a teacher, counselor, director of an alternative education center, elementary school principal, educational specialist, field service agent, and school superintendent. His major focus is the preparation of future school leaders who will primarily serve minority children.

**Betty Merchant** is the dean of the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Texas–San Antonio. Before going to Texas, she taught at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign; in public schools, preschool through high school; and in tribally controlled Native American schools in the Southwest. Her research interests focus on educational policy, equity, student diversity, and school leadership.