Thriving in School Leadership: Latina/o Leaders Speak Out

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Abstract

Latino students are the fastest growing population in our K-12 school system today. Corresponding to this rapid growth are persistent educational disparities between Latina/o students and their White counterparts, leading to subsequent economic disparities. As is the case with most successful social justice movements, it will take the collaborative effort of Latina/o school leaders and allies from other races/ethnicities to effectively eliminate educational disparities for Latina/o students. This article presents demographic data regarding educational and economic disparities between White and Latina/o populations in the Pacific Northwest, followed by the results of a qualitative study examining the preparation, hiring, and leadership experiences of 10 Pacific Northwest Latina/o leaders who have successfully reduced educational disparities. This article concludes by sharing advice that successful Latina/o leaders have for future Latina/o leaders.

Keywords: Latino, leadership, equity, diversity, mentoring

Latino students are the fastest growing population in our K-12 school system today (United States Census Bureau, 2011). Corresponding to this rapid growth are persistent educational disparities between Latina/o students and their White counterparts at the national level (see Table 1).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Latina/o</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High school graduation</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earned BA</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


While cumbersome, the authors intentionally use “Latina/o” to explicitly include women.
Similar disparities exist in the Pacific Northwest, the location of this study (see Table 2).

Table 2

**Educational Disparities in the Pacific Northwest**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Latina/o</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduate high school within 4 years</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>60.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attain 5th grade benchmark-reading</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attain 5th grade benchmark-math</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attain high school benchmark-reading</td>
<td>88.5%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attain high school benchmark-math</td>
<td>78.6%</td>
<td>60.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identified as talented and gifted</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.

Educational disparities among students from the non-dominant culture are a well-documented component of the school to prison pipeline that disproportionately impacts communities of color (Fasching-Varner, Mitchell, Martin & Bennett-Haron, K., 2014), leading to extreme disparities in home ownership, arrests, and poverty (Curry-Stevens, Cross-Hemmer, & Coalition of Communities of Color, 2010; Reardon, 2013). The changing demographic profile in the US and corresponding educational practices demonstrate the urgency of creating conditions for the success of Latina/o school children. A failure to successfully educate Latina/o children negates the potentially rich societal contributions of Latina/o families while increasing societal costs (Coley & Baker, 2013).

As with most successful social justice movements, it will take the collaborative effort of Latina/o school leaders and allies from other races and ethnicities, as well as multiple educational strategies, to effectively eliminate educational disparities for Latina/o students. Schools must address non-academic barriers to school success (Noguera, 2008; Peterson & Lehnhoff, 2014; Reardon, 2013) while also providing culturally responsive curriculum (Delpit, 2002; Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2000; Noguera, 2008), opportunities to build on assets or the Funds of Knowledge of under-served students and their families (Gonzalez et al., 1993), and culturally responsive school leadership (Peterson, 2014).

This article focuses on culturally responsive school leadership by examining the preparation, hiring, and leadership experiences of 10 Pacific Northwest Latina/o leaders who have success fully reduced educational disparities. We conclude by sharing advice that successful Latina/o leaders have for future Latina/o leaders.

**Characteristics of Schools and Leaders Successful with Latina/o Students**

Educational policy in the Pacific NW focuses on 1) increasing the diversity of school
leaders (Boser, 2011; Oregon Department of Education [ODE], n.d.; Teachers Standards and Practices Commission, n.d.) and 2) implementing culturally responsive teaching and leadership practices in schools (Boser, 2011; ODE; State of Washington, Superintendent of Public Instruction [SPI], n.d.).

The Pacific NW has not yet reached its goal of increasing the diversity of school leaders (ODE, n.d.; State of Washington, SPI, n.d.), a goal supported by researchers who propose that school leaders who reflect the diversity of the student population will contribute to the success of students from the non-dominant culture (Boser, 2011; Dee, 2004; Dee, 2005; Goldsmith, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lopez, Magdaleno, & Mendoza, 2006). Latina/o students comprise 19% of the region’s K-12 students and teachers of color comprise 8% of teachers and 12% of administrators of color (Boser, 2011; ODE, n.d.). Because most US school leaders are from the dominant culture, we propose, and numerous researchers agree (Gay, 2010; Lindsey, Roberts, & Campbelljones, 2005; Murakami, Valle, & Mendez-Morse, 2013; Nelson & Guerra, 2014), that all leaders must be skilled at eliminating racial and ethnic disparities in schools.

A social justice orientation is one foundational characteristic of leaders who reduce educational disparities (Banks & Banks, 2010; Gay, 2010; Hooks, 1994; Theoharris, 2007). Lopez (2013) rightfully demands that social justice leaders focus on “systemic inequities, radical structural transformation, and moral purpose” (p. 512). We concur, believing that a strong moral purpose with a social justice orientation, the ability to identify and address myriad overt and covert school structures and systems that perpetuate inequities, and skilled, caring, visionary transformational leadership are foundational to social justice leadership (Peterson, Petti, & Carlile, 2013). Leading change to reduce educational disparities will require additional leadership strategies beyond just a social justice orientation, as displayed in Table 3.
Table 3

*Characteristics of Schools and Leaders Successful with Latina/o Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adapt the change process to a context</td>
<td>Marzano, Waters, &amp; McNulty, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implement a culturally responsive, rigorous curriculum for all students</td>
<td>Frattura &amp; Capper, 2007; Johnson &amp; Avelar La Salle, 2010; Kuykendall, 1992; Nieto, 2000; Skrla, McKenzie, &amp; Scheurich, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extend culturally responsive care to all within the school system</td>
<td>Gay, 2010; Gordon, 2012a, b; Noguera, 2008; Theoharris, 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embed the cultural norms of the students into all practices of the school with asset-rich disposition</td>
<td>Delpit, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lindsey et al., 2005; Nelson &amp; Guerra, 2014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide in-class and out-of-school time supports so all students succeed</td>
<td>Peterson &amp; Lehnhoff, 2014; Reardon, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure the students, families, and faculty have a school environment that offers hope</td>
<td>Duncan-Andrade, 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure school’s programs, policies, and practices reflect perspectives of those from non-dominant culture</td>
<td>Fullan, 2002; Peterson, 2013; Nelson, Bustamente, Wilson, &amp; Nelson, &amp; Onwuegbuzie, 2008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To prepare future leaders, the Wallace Foundation (King, 2013) also points to several conditions that result in excellent principal preparation: 1) university-district partnerships; 2) emphasis on knowledge and skills for improving schools and raising student achievement; 3) well-planned and supported field experiences; 4) rigorous evaluation of participants, mastery of essential competencies, and program quality and effectiveness (pp. 6-11). Notably, this research has a minimal focus on leadership for equity and culturally responsive practices.

**The Experiences of Latina/o Leaders**

This qualitative study examines the experiences and perspectives of 10 Latina/o school leaders from the Pacific Northwest who have significantly influenced educational disparities in their schools/districts. Using the framework of a multiple case study (Gay, 1992) bounded by time and activity (Creswell, 2003), we examined the phenomenon of Latina/o leadership success in schools in order to provide insight into the phenomenon of Latina/o leadership success (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996). We used the interview process, with eight questions designed to elicit participants’ perspectives on their career pathway: who helped, inspired, and motivated them in
their careers; who held them back as they became leaders; how their formal preparation programs prepared them or what they wish their program had prepared them for as Latina/o leaders; the best advice and support they were given as they assumed leadership roles; how they created conditions for success of Latina/o children in their schools; and what future Latina/o leaders need to know about becoming school leaders.

All participants were purposively selected based on their recognition by state or national organizations for their leadership in successfully reducing educational disparities, self-identification as Latina/o, and having achieved tenure in their educational system. We included 10 participants in order to increase the trustworthiness of the findings and to examine whether a pattern of responses would be revealed (Creswell, 2003). Four participants were born in Spanish-speaking countries, six in the United States. Spanish was the first language for all participants, with the exception of one respondent who was raised speaking what he described as “Spanglish.” Four participants identify as women, six as men. To protect the confidentiality of respondents, we interviewed respondents in a private space of their selection and masked identifying characteristics.

We used inductive and deductive analysis to identify common themes among respondents. First, both researchers read all interviews and independently identified key themes from each interview. We then confirmed the key themes of each interview and identified commonalities among the 10 interviews. Next, we examined whether responses differed based on the gender or immigration status of the respondents. After identifying additional similarities among responses, we drafted preliminary findings, which we confirmed with the participants to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of our interpretation of the data. We also confirmed that our analysis does not reveal participants’ identity. The primary findings of this study are summarized as follows:

- US born began careers in US in k-12 system in entry level position,
- Leaders in schools with high numbers of Latina/o students,
- Someone saw potential in them,
- Supporters were not of their racial/ethnic background,
- Social justice experience as youth or when first living in US,
- The “system” is a barrier for Latina/os,
- Overt racist statement/microaggressions recently directed at them,
- Preparation for leadership only in managerial aspects of leadership, and
- Advice includes will have to work harder, longer hours, and always be better.

**Latina/o Leaders’ Pathways to Success**

Participants in this study were asked to describe their career pathway as educators. The four participants born in Spanish-speaking countries began their careers in the US outside the K-12 school system, two in low- and two in high-prestige jobs. Their first educational roles varied: educational assistant, teacher, or school leader. All US-born Latina/o leaders began their educational career in the K-12 system in entry-level positions such as an educational assistant, preschool teacher, or after-school teacher in schools with high numbers of English Learners (ELs), Latina/o children, and/or children of migrant workers. All participants eventually became leaders of schools with high numbers of Latina/o children or ELs.
“Someone Saw Something in Me”

When asked, “Who helped you, inspired you, and motivated you along the way,” US-born respondents mentioned a teacher, counselor, or after-school teacher who noticed them, cared for them, and encouraged them to go to college, people we will call “supporters.” Of the four respondents born in Spanish-speaking countries, three had supporters who encouraged a career in education. Half of the supporters were the opposite gender; however, women were more likely to serve as supporters. All female respondents had supporters who were not of their ethnic/racial background, a phenomenon explored by Latina feminist researchers (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Two women had two or more supporters, one of whom was Latina. All male respondents had White supporters. Two respondents, one US born and one born outside the US, made no mention of someone seeing something in them and supporting them.

US Born Latina/o Leaders and Social Justice Focus

All US-born respondents reported a strong social justice experience at a formative time in their lives. All were involved with farm workers’ rights, the civil rights movement, or with educational or legal disparities in US communities. All leaders born in Spanish-speaking countries became aware of disparities once they lived and worked in the US, which is where their commitment to social justice began. For all respondents, this commitment to social justice later became the foundation for their moral imperative to work as educational leaders.

“The System” as a Barrier to Latina/o Leadership Success

Because of disparities in educational attainment and percentage of teachers and leaders of color in our schools, we made the assumption that there are significant barriers to Latina/o leadership success (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Sexton, 2010; J. Gordon, 2000; Sanchez, Thornton, & Usinger, 2008). We asked the question, “Who or what held you back or tried to hold you back as you became a leader?” There was substantial agreement that “the system” was not designed for Latina/o leaders to be successful. Respondents noted the complexity of navigating the socio-political context in which they may not be supported. As one respondent said, “I had to be better, be stronger, be smarter, because [people in the community] are looking to me to fail.” Examples of how the system held Latina/o leaders back included who makes hiring decisions (generally White administrators), implicit biases against Latinas/os in general, and perhaps additional biases regarding Latina women. Most participants also commented on acting professionally in their personal and professional lives so as not to reinforce negative ethnic stereotyping by the dominant culture.

Overt racist comments. While some imply we live in a post-racist society, others disagree (Lum, 2009), reflecting the experiences of the subjects in this study. All subjects experienced multiple micro-aggressions (Sue, 2010); all but one experienced overt comments of an indisputable racist nature within the previous five years. Micro-aggressions included comments such as “Are you related to the guys at the taco stand down the street?” Most respondents were told or overhead others saying they were only hired for a school leadership position because of their ethnicity. Others had “jokes” made to them. For example, one school leader was being introduced to
prominent community members when a well-known community leader laughingly said, “Oh, you ARE documented?” and looked around at the others to join in the laughter. Another leader was asked why he should be hired since all the Latina/o employees he had hired were unreliable, didn’t work hard, and drank on the job. Another school leader was directly asked, “Are you the head Spic?” One school leader was leading a community meeting when a well-known businessperson repeatedly used the word “Spic” when referring to Latina/o students. Another administrator noticed that White colleagues would often arrive late for meetings without a comment but when he was late was told, “Ah, running on Mexican time, are you?” to which others laughed. Most respondents also experienced being told by hiring administrators that they were not yet ready for leadership roles or were not a “good fit” for the district. All but one respondent indicated they remained silent or looked away when these comments were made. The one respondent who called out the racist comments subsequently learned that those making the comments later telephoned area superintendents to dissuade them from hiring him. This was also the only respondent who shared his experiences with other Latina/o administrators; the rest had never told their story, not even to other Latina/o administrators, prior to this study.

The fact that participants have recently had these experiences points clearly to the need for principal preparation programs and districts to put systems of support in place for current and future Latina/o leaders. As one respondent said, “not that much has changed” since the era of Civil Rights movement but school leadership “is not just a career path; this is the work of the heart and soul…it’s for our children.”

Components of Successful Principal Preparation

As school districts work to recruit diverse school leaders and principal preparation programs examine the effectiveness of their programs, it is critically important to understand the perspective of successful Latina/o leaders regarding their preparation. We asked, “How did your formal training for school administration prepare you to become a Latina/o leader in our schools?” The respondents were prepared more than five years ago, and it is possible that preparation programs have changed since then. However, all respondents reported that their preparation program only prepared them for managerial aspects of school leadership, such as finance, law, or budgeting (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015). When asked, “What do you wish your formal training program had prepared you for that you weren’t prepared for in your first leadership role?” most answers pertained to issues of equity and racism. Most respondents indicated that preparation programs should prepare future leaders to understand how to address systemic inequities in our schools. In addition, the programs should explicitly address the racism that school leaders of color will face and to coach them on how to respond. Further, most respondents indicated that preparation programs should invite current leaders of color to share their stories and their strategies for responding to bias from students, parents, teachers, community members, and their supervisors.

Advice Latina/o Leaders give Future Leaders of Color

The respondents in this study were asked, “What was the best advice and support you

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2 All subjects will be referred to as male in this section to protect the confidentiality of subjects.
were given as you became a leader in our schools?” and “What else should future Latina/o leaders know about becoming a leader in our schools?” Overwhelmingly, respondents indicated that future leaders of color must understand that they will come under intense scrutiny. As one respondent said, “Even after 10 years [of proving myself], I have to show that I can do that every time.” Future Latina/o leaders will need to “understand the culture of the place where you are working, work to support all students; by doing that, people begin to see your work and begin to trust you, and you generate credibility.” Because of the increased scrutiny, all respondents noted they had developed a thick skin and had become very resilient. They recommended keeping a focus on the needs of the children to help them persevere through challenging times. Respondents also noted the importance of making good decisions 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in their personal and professional lives. Several respondents noted that the professional dress code does not reflect the norms of their upbringing, but that they made a decision to adopt the dress norms of leaders of the dominant culture to avoid criticism from teachers, family members or community members. Some respondents noted that some Latina/o colleagues question their commitment to Latina/o students and the Latina/o culture because of their focus on all kids, not just Latina/o student success. They were aware of having a foot in two worlds. Seven respondents were clear that a very strong support network of school leaders must be cultivated. Our respondents noted their support network was comprised of leaders of different gender, racial and ethnic backgrounds.

**Implications for Districts, Principal Preparation, and Mentoring Programs**

The findings of this study have implications for district hiring practices, mentoring programs, and principal preparation programs. In addition, this study points to the importance of organizations creating a culture of support for current and future school leaders of color through policy, as well as through professional development that supports concrete solutions.

**District Hiring Practices**

First, districts must examine their curriculum to ensure that children of all backgrounds understand the historical and societal injustices in the US. Culturally responsive project-based learning can provide an opportunity to examine local, regional, and national injustices, thus developing a social justice orientation for future educators. Second, districts should develop “grow your own” programs to recruit future teachers into the teaching profession by hiring Latina/o educational assistants, pre-school teachers, and after-school providers. Districts need to then nurture successful Latina/o teachers and recruit them into school leadership (Nevarez & Wood, 2007). Third, hiring practices must ensure that implicit biases about Latina/o applicants are examined and addressed. It is unfair to tell Latina/o future leaders that they are too young, a bad fit, or not ready, when similar future leaders from the dominant culture are nurtured and promoted. Districts must also examine practices that place Latina/o administrators primarily in schools or districts with high Latina/o populations. Perhaps this practice reflects the desire for Latina/o children to have role models; however, it may reflect implicit biases that limit Latina/o leaders’ career opportunities.
Mentoring Programs

Districts must ensure they have developed a system for recognizing and rewarding current school leaders who mentor Latina/o teacher leaders into school leadership roles and that mentors of all races and genders are mentoring Latina/o future leaders. In addition, districts must create a network of support for Latina/o leaders, with a focus on the unique and disturbing racial bias often directed toward Latina/o leaders. The support network must ensure a safe place to share experiences and strategies to eliminate the isolation felt by Latina/o leaders (Nevarez & Wood, 2007).

Principal Preparation Programs

Principal preparation programs must review and revise their curriculum to meet state and national standards. They must also ensure that future leaders of the dominant and non-dominant culture become fierce leaders for equity. Our student population is dramatically more diverse than our teaching and school leadership population and the diversity of our school leaders is not growing fast enough to ensure that our leaders’ cultural backgrounds are proportional to the students’ cultural backgrounds. This means that we have to prepare all future leaders to be strong equity leaders who understand the ways that the current system advantages students, families, teachers, and leaders from the dominant culture and disadvantages those of color. Leaders who have not examined societal disparities must be given multiple, deep learning experiences in their preparation program. This includes examining privileges that have come by virtue of one’s gender, race, ethnicity, home language, and social status. Principal preparation programs must ensure future leaders are prepared for micro-aggressions and overt racist statements. Course readings must include research from authors of the non-dominant culture and the lived experiences of successful school leaders of all backgrounds. Finally, support for future leaders cannot end when the preparation program is completed. To address the isolation reported by the respondents in this study, principal preparation programs should work in collaboration with school districts and professional organizations to ensure support, encouragement, and celebration of successes that nurture the heart and soul of Latina/o leaders and allies.

Thriving Despite Obstacles

As discussed in this article, educational policy in the Pacific NW has focused on creating culturally responsive teachers and leaders, while simultaneously increasing the diversity of the educator workforce. Despite these stated goals, numerous obstacles face current and future leaders of color. Some may wonder how Latina/o leaders can possibly survive, let alone thrive, under these conditions. Obstacles begin in the K-12 school system and continue in leadership preparation programs in which leaders are unprepared for leadership for equity, particularly as members of the non-dominant culture. Obstacles persist through employment practices that fail to hire, support, and retain school leaders of color and include indignities that range from microaggressions to blatantly racist comments. Despite these obstacles, barriers that might cause them to leave the profession or retreat into complacency, the Latina/o leaders in this study are thriving. They have received local, state, and national recognition for their work reducing educational disparities. They
have developed strong networks of support among Latina/o colleagues and allies from other races and ethnicities. They remain focused on meeting the needs of all school children, including Latina/o children. The obstacles have strengthened their fortitude, doubled their persistence. While the data revealed in this study present unsettling information, they also provide guidance for educators in the K-12 school system, principal preparation programs, human resources departments, and mentoring programs. Ultimately, this study provides hope for future Latina/o leaders.
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**Authors**

**Deborah Peterson** served as a teacher and school leader for 30 years and now prepares future school leaders who are fierce equity leaders. She has collaborated with numerous principals, community groups, and school district leaders who have successfully reduced educational disparities in the Pacific Northwest.

**Victor Vergara** is a doctoral student and a principal in a high school with a large number of Latina/o students from a low-socio economic status and one of the highest graduation rates in the state. He has been working in education for 20 years with staff, parents and community members, focusing on equity and social justice for all students.