Latina/o School Administrators and the Intersectionality of Professional Identity and Race

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Abstract
This study examines the intersectionality between professional identities and race/ethnicity among Latina/o school leaders. Stemming from a larger study at the National Latina/o Leadership Project, we examine the contributions of Latina/o school administrators in the state of Texas in relation to their leadership in K-12 schools. Two hundred twenty-six respondents inform this study. Descriptive and content analyses of data revealed that the intersectionality of race and class as influencing the work of school administrators and described how, among major influences, their own schooling experiences had an impact in the development of their professional identities.

Keywords
educational administration, leadership and policy, education, social sciences, race/gender, education theory and practice, educational research, Latino/a sociology, sociology of race and ethnicity, sociology

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of Latina/o school administrators in Texas. In consideration is the principals’ intersectionality between professional identity and race. Scribner and Crow (2012) indicated the importance of professional identity in research on school leaders as it relates to their role beyond the development of technical skills. Professional identity relates to the multiple identities that shape leaders, and the nature of their leadership in relation to the populations they serve. The essence...
of professional identity relates to the evolving nature of school leaders’ ontology, and how it informs their professional role.

The state of Texas serves 5,000,000 children in K-12 schools. The Texas Education Agency reported that in 2014, 52% of students were Hispanic, 29% were White, and 13% were African American (Texas Education Agency, 2016). Data from the National Latina/o Leadership Project survey include 215 Latina/o school administrators and observed their schooling experiences and how their background and race impact their work as school leaders. Questions considered for this study included the following: (a) Describe your schooling experiences. (b) Has your racial/ethnic background create barriers in your work as a school administrator? (c) Has your racial/ethnic background been a benefit in your work as an administrator? Findings in this study show that the school administrators’ schooling experiences, successes, and barriers contributed to shape their professional role and the development of a professional identity.

Rationale

In 2006, the founder and president of the National Hispanic Institute, Ernesto Nieto (2006) indicated a need to organize Latinas/os in America to “influence thinking, alter the social trajectories and directions of collective bodies of Latinos, and cause significant shifts in the social perspectives, beliefs, and outlooks of either various subsectors or the entirety of the Latino community” (p. 84). At the time, he defined this need as a Latina/o leadership crisis. He highlighted the importance of developing a community that (a) can recognize the ongoing collective capacity and effectiveness in enacting community-focused change and (b) can determine ways of creating a critical mass for addressing internal conflicts, and included considerations of Latina/o upbringing in the development of an individual and national identity.

Indeed, even though Latinas/os can be defined based on cultural and collective values, there are internal differences among the several groups that compose the Hispanic community. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) differentiated Hispanics as Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish-speaking backgrounds, regardless of race (Murakami, Valle, & Mendez-Morse, 2013). Each country’s background generates variability in personal values and purpose. Such variability of Latinas/os also influences their development of a professional identity, which will vary due to language-base similarities, but varied roots. Unifying this diversity is a call for the development of a Latina/o national voice and identity according to Nieto (2007) and Trueba (1999).

Trueba (1999) advocated for the development of a Latina/o cultural identity, stating that leaders should have “specific qualities of vision, biculturalism, multiple identities, the ability to code-switch and a profound commitment to democratic ideals of fair participation in the political and economic arenas for all Americans” (p. 25). Nieto (2007) believed that Latinas/os have the potential to develop community equity by

... attracting involvement via initiatives that heighten the bar of expectations in the quality of life people prefer to live, engaging parents in pursuing new forms of socializing and educating their children beyond what public education is able to provide, and creating the environments that broaden and sustain the structures needed to significantly increase participation across all sectors of Latino community life. (p. 86)

This social responsibility is echoed across the diverse groups that compose Latinas/os in America, which comprised 54 million in 2013 or 17% of the total U.S. population (Stepler & Brown, 2015).

Latina/o Leadership Literature

Scholars exploring Latina/o leadership like Bordas (2015) affirm that Latinas/os possess leadership traits conducive to addressing the aforementioned crisis indicated by Nieto (2006). Bordas contends that Latinas/os come from a We-orientation, or people-centered culture. In schools in need of improved performance, a leader who can build a cohesive culture can positively impact a campus culture. She reminds us that Latinas/os grow up contributing to their families and communities since an early age, developing values such as cooperation, reciprocity, and generosity.

Social and civic engagement is particularly important in fostering school change. When promoting social justice for diverse groups in schools is perceived as an important aspect in improving schools (Anderson, 2009; Bogotch et al., 2008; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Theoharis, 2009), culture-centered leadership can be considered of particular significance. Bordas (2015) indicated five fundamental principles Latinas/os carry, significant in building a culture-centered leadership. These are as follows: (a) An intergenerational spirit, related to how Latinas/os have maintained sight of the generational responsibility to work together toward a common good; (b) the Latina/o leader as one among equals, nurturing shared governance and rotating responsibilities to cultivate leadership in others and strengthening a We culture; (c) Junto: a collective community stewardship toward short-term and long-term vision to remain focused on a step-by-step process that counts on every small and large contribution; (d) Sí, se puede (Yes we can!) which relates to exercising social activism and coalition building, fostering a sense of culture and community, advocating and participating in issues of community concern; and finally (e) Gozar la vida—with quintessential leadership that promotes the celebration of life through community celebrations, oral traditions, and storytelling that integrates history and cultural traditions. Similarly, Yosso (2005) has also identified six elements of cultural wealth that can impact the practice of school leaders.
In this model, Yosso (2005) argued that students of color bring with them six forms of cultural capital that can be used to improve the outcomes. These capitals include aspiration, language, familial support, social skills, navigational, and resistance capital. It would not be uncommon to think that Latino school leaders have been able to bring these cultural wealth elements into their own leadership practice.

Despite these potential qualities, Latina/o school administrators are not necessarily largely represented nationally. The 2013 NCES condition of education report shows that from 89,000 school administrators working in U.S. public schools, only 7% are Latinas/os, when compared with 80% White and 10% African Americans school administrators (Bitterman, Goldring, & Gray, 2013). One of the considerations in this study is whether a racial/ethnic background creates barriers in the attainment of educational leadership positions. If the path to becoming a school administrator requires a teaching background, the same report accounts for only 8% of Hispanic teachers represented nationwide. In states like Texas, where the racial diversity of students shows that 52% of students are Latina/o, the number of school administrators who could foster a specific culture-centered leadership for the improvement of students seems conspicuously sparse. In 2012, 1,742 Latina/o school administrators were identified in the state of Texas, which may represent 2% of the overall total considering the aforementioned NCES report. One of the barriers for the small representation of Latinas/os in school leadership positions may relate to continuing systems of oppression.

Intersectionality of Race and Identity

The diverse Latino population is the fastest growing in the United States, has a burgeoning political and economic impact on the country, but still faces homogeneous categorization. Oboler (1995) outlined that Hispanic and Latino labels are in fact abstractions of reality, and their usage may inevitably single out socially constructed attributes. That is, by accepting these labels, individuals may be subject to limitations related to race, gender, class, or language. Labels are connected to attributes which may then be considered common to the group and can be used to create assumptions for the individuals in the group (Oboler, 1995). Lisa Garcia Bedolla (2005) argued that to understand the contradictions and dilemmas that arise from Latino contact with reality, “An analysis of the Latino experience in the United States must be situated at the intersection of power, collective identity(ies), and place” (p. 4). The analysis of intersectionality of race and identity for Latinos, especially Latina/o educators, is critical as spaces of political power within the spheres of education continue to situate Latino identity in marginalized contexts.

The Institute for Social, Behavioral, and Economic Research (ISBER) out of the University of California Santa Barbara with the Center for New Racial Studies (n.d.) posits as follows:

“Intersectionality” is the name that is now given to the complex of reciprocal attachments and sometimes polarizing conflicts that confront both individuals and movements as they seek to “navigate” among the raced, gendered, and class-based dimensions of social and political life. Both as individuals seeking to make a socially just and fulfilling “everyday life,” and as collectivities seeking to “make history” through political action and social movements, we struggle with the unstable connections between race, gender, and class (para. 1).

Both Latina/o students and educational professionals may still be discriminated and treated as marginal to those expected to represent educational success (Holvino, 2008; Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, & Abdulrahim, 2012). Analyzing immigration and health, Viruell-Fuentes et al. (2012) recognized that “becoming American involves contending with ideologies that render them racial ‘minorities’ and the stigmatized meanings that the racialized society ascribes to their specific group” (p. 2101). Holvino (2008) argued that work and scholarship at the intersections of race, class, and gender are still underdeveloped. This sentiment extends to a generalized perception of people of color as racialized “others” reproducing inequality within an ethnoracial hierarchy (Collins, 1998, 2000; Viruell-Fuentes, 2007, 2011). Collins (2000) further defined how an intersectionality of race, ethnicity, class, and other social categories limits people of color’s access to successful positions in society. By recognizing that Black women’s experiences were also shaped by race and class (Collins, 1998, 2000), she showed that intersectionality further evidences a system of oppression mutually constituted to work together to produce inequality (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989). Although intersectionality has impacted feminist theory and critical race theory, a conceptual framework exploring intersectionality as impacting the professional identity and opportunities for Latina/o school administrators is warranted.

When discussing ways that intersectionality works, it is important to consider that forms of oppression do not operate independently. Many forms of discrimination are intertwined with others and intersect within the various areas of race, ethnic, socioeconomic, and even religious identities. This concept of intersectionality was first defined academically in the 1980s (Crenshaw, 1989), but it has been subject to discourse since the early 1990s when women’s rights and feminism began gaining traction.

It may be easy to consider a specific form of racial oppression or discrimination as operating in a vacuum. For example, when considering the victimization of gay youth, many leaders and administrators may simply see them as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth and ignore their membership in other minorities. However, personal identity is fluid and multifaceted, and developing this sense...
of identity is a complex and varied process. Similarly, a student’s experience is not accurately described simply as being gay and as being a religious minority—these experiences intersect, intertwine, and influence each other. As such, when categorizing school leaders by minority membership only, one runs the risk of stereotyping and reductionist attitudes toward understanding their work and life. At the intersection of race and other professional identities, for example, an individual may attribute their experiences to a single category (gender), to a different category (race), or to many categories at once (language, gender, and race), which, in turn, shapes their perception of the experience.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework of intersectionality is the lens employed to examine Latina/o school administrators in this study. Dill and Zambrana (2009) defined intersectionality as a critical lens to interrogate race, ethnicity, class, ability, age, nation, sexuality, and gender within structures of inequality. Collins further contextualized intersectionality within a system that politically constructs these categories within a hierarchy of social organization, which defines the experiences of people of color, which, in her study, explored the lives of Black females. Holvino (2008) stated the relationship between women and men of color is “the area in which feminists of color have made fewer inroads . . . because intergroup ethnic/racial conflict creates the need for little-questioned solidarity in order to survive” (Hurtado, 1996, p. 381). In this study, we explore intersectionality as influencing the professional identity of school administrators.

Professional identity relates to the evolving nature of defining an individual’s professional role. Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) asserted that professional identity “is not a fixed attribute of a person, but a relational phenomenon” (p. 108). In educational leadership, Scribner and Crow (2012) explored the professional identity of school leaders as an important investigation of personal and professional values beyond the achievement of technical skills. When exploring the development of a professional identity, Gee (2001) reflected that “one cannot have an identity of any sort without some interpretive system” (p. 107). DeRue and Ashford (2010) further argued that a leader identity is both an internal cognition and a socially constructed cognition that build on the interplay between leader and follower. Considering the effect of intersectionality among Latina/o school administrators, it is important to explore how Latinas/os interpreted their experiences to build their professional identity.

In states like Texas, where the context of traditionally underserved students limits the opportunity for success, the pipeline from student to educational professional can be examined to explore the negotiation of one’s identity in relation to oppressive systems and societal participation. Scholars indeed asserted that identity involves an understanding of self, and it is influenced by their social context and experiences (Gee, 2001; Stets & Burke, 2000). Mpungose (2010) adopted a humanistic perspective to examine leadership and concluded that school administrators created their own provisional selves, building professional identities from their own experiences and professional knowledge. Mpungose (2010) further explained that provisional selves relates to temporary solutions school administrators may use to close a gap between their current capacities, and ideas they may hold about attitudes and behaviors that may be expected in their roles. In fact, Helena and Abrahao (2002) contended that in education, it is hard to separate the personal from the professional, especially when considering the leadership role, which may directly relate with values and ideals in a position that can be very demanding in its commitment to human relations. The examination of intersectionality among Latina/o school administrators and their personal and professional identity illuminates a critical and political examination of “behaviors, attitudes, and values prevalent within American society” (Lopez-Class, Gonzales Castro, & Ramirez, 2011, p. 1558). One final note regarding labels and the designation of ethnic identity as it relates to this study. Without a doubt, the United States is experiencing unprecedented demographic changes as it relates to Spanish-speaking individuals; however, sometimes it is unclear on the label that should be used to describe this rising population. The researchers of this study have agreed to use the term Latino, which is short for latinoamericano. We use “Latino” because it was created within the Latino community, connotes common values but leaves room for individual differences and does not strip people of their historical identity.

**Method**

This study recruited 231 participants via email invitations, which described the study as a Texas-wide survey of Latina/o superintendents, principals, and assistant principals. Developed as a state-specific project in the National Latino Leadership Project (NLLP), its purpose is to further identify characteristics about leadership style and career paths. The NLLP represents a 10-year collaboration among Latina/o scholars from universities across the country.

The initial NLLP project began through discussion around common leadership questions and evolved into a large-scale study of Latina/o school leaders. In 2007, a group of scholars conducted the first national survey of Latina/o school administrators and presented the findings of this first every national survey at various national conventions and international research conferences in subsequent years. NLLP investigated the representation of Latina/o assistant school administrators in the United States, including their challenges and aspirations. Some of the following questions composed the initial survey: (a) What are the demographics of Latina/o assistant school administrators?
variables considered as influencing the professional work of school administrators, who described their schooling experiences as leading to the development of their professional identities. To provide contextual information in relation to the respondents, we first include demographic data to inform the responses. Also included are rates of responses to the questions, followed by answers to open-ended sections provided for each of the questions, which included reflections on their experiences growing up in schools; the extent their racial/ethnic background created barriers in their work as an administrator; and challenges in their leadership.
Demographical Characteristics

This study included 216 participants, of which 91 were males and 125 females. Fifty-eight percent of participants self-identified as Hispanic. Others self-identified as Mexican (20%) and Latina/o (7%). The participants ranged from 28 to 73 years of age (M = 47.45, SD = 9.04). Less than 1% (N = 2) identified as Puerto Rican, and 9% of the participants identified as “Other.” Eighty-six percent of participants were U.S. born. Ten percent were born in Mexico and 3% selected “Other.” Of the U.S. born participants, 88% (N = 162) were born in Texas.

In terms of languages spoken, 90% of participants reported fluency in Spanish beyond English proficiency. As educators, these participants spoke Spanish mainly with students and their families. Sixty-one percent of the participants reported that their racial or ethnic background positively impacted their work as an administrator: Sixty-six percent of the participants indicated that their racial or ethnic background has helped them connect with students (with 14% responding as “neutral”). Also, 76% of the participants reported that their ethnicity did not present a barrier in their work as administrators, selecting “rarely” or “never” when asked whether ethnicity created barriers or problems in their work as administrators.

The school administrators indicated their highest level of education. Twenty percent of participants reported to have a doctorate degree, 63% had master’s degrees, 16% declared having an education specialist certification, and 2% indicated a bachelor’s degree as their highest degree. From the sample, the majority of participants (81%) were serving as school administrators and 10% were serving in the superintendent role.

The participants shared information about their formal preparation. Besides principals and superintendents, seven participants indicated they were assistant principals, and 11 indicated they served in other administrative positions. Eighty-three participants acquired their principal or superintendent certification at a public university, whereas 10% attended private institutions. Few participants declared earning their degrees from an online university (n = 4) or a liberal arts college (n = 1). As undergraduates, 27% of participants (n = 57) indicated they began their education at a community college. The majority of participants (75%) indicated that they were “well prepared” or “very well prepared” when they began their current position.

The school administrators reported that on average, their experiences as students in school were very positive. Seventy-six percent responded that their experiences ranged from “positive” to “very positive.” Overwhelmingly, participants also cited the role of mentors in choosing administrative work. Seventy-nine percent of school leaders indicated that mentorship played a significant role in their development of leadership skills and style. The school leaders indicated that their leadership style was “democratic” or “delegative” and only 16 participants indicated a very autocratic leadership style. In addition, 81% indicated that a mentor was important in attaining the position they currently hold; 74% indicated that they currently serve as a mentor or role model to another aspiring professional. Forty-two percent of salaries among school administrators ranged from US$70,000 to US$90,000 a year, 34% reporting earnings of US$90,000 to US$110,000 a year. Only 21 participants indicated they were earning more than US$110,000. Salaries for males and females did not differ.

Early Schooling Experiences

Participants were asked how they would describe their school experiences. We considered the focus on early school experiences as affecting not only individuals in schools but also their health (i.e., Cummins, 1986; Kumanyika & Grier, 2006). Latinos and African American students are more commonly the focus of interventions. Hardships threatening their academic success often are related with language and poverty. However, it is important to consider Cummins’s (1986) observation that while interventions are often implemented with positive intent, these have not necessarily proved to alter the relationships between educators and students of color, nor the relationship between schools and communities of color. In our intent to learn about those Latina/o students who presented an interest in becoming teachers and administrators, we inquired whether Latinas/os who became teachers and subsequently school administrators were students who did not necessarily experience difficult relationships in schools. Indeed, very fewer school administrators communicated their experiences in school as negative. However, this was not always the case. Surprisingly, 6% of the participants communicated that their experiences in school were negative. On the flipside, only 37% of school administrators expressed their experiences as very positive. Many expressed that their experience in school presented a gamut of both positive and negative aspects (see Figure 1).

Many of the participants contributed with open-ended positive responses. These responses showed the influential role of teachers. Respondents who added comments to negative experiences sections of the Likert-type scale instrument (i.e., Figure 1, Options 1, 2, or 3) shared memories of the following interactions with teachers:

Based on the responses, categorized under negative experiences in school, it is clear that many of these experiences were related to the leader’s racial identity, including the intersectionality of language and ethnicity. For example, when participants use words such as “discriminated” and “had donkey ears put on my head,” this can have traumatic results for children. Other leaders who wrote about negative experiences reflected on their treatment for speaking their native language and being Hispanic, pointing again to the intersectionality of race and language. Two of the leaders wrote about the physical punishment for speaking Spanish.
Among responses indicating school experiences were both positive and negative (survey responses with a Likert-type response 4), the influence of teachers is evidenced. Open-ended responses included the following:

These leaders express that while they had both positive and negative experiences in school, most of their negative experiences centered on issues related to language, Spanish names, and being isolated from other students. As they reflected in the survey, they also experienced lower expectations from teachers and questions about their cognitive abilities based on language skills only. Despite these negative experiences, the Latina/o school leaders persevered and made the best of their experiences.

School administrators who responded having positive experiences, similarly relate those experiences as being influenced by teachers and the importance of being validated in their efforts. Interestingly, not all open-ended responses were only positive as follows:

All responses analyzed indicate the strong influence of adults in determining these school administrators schooling experiences, with strong intersectionality between negative experiences and race, and negative experiences and language. Furthermore, it was clear that the participants in the study could recognize the teachers who cared about and for them. Looking back at their schooling experiences and acknowledging both the good and the bad, these Latina/o school leaders knew which teachers empathized with them and could understand their experiences. Even though respondents are between 33 and 68 years old, it was hard as a research group to understand how corporate punishment was used to encourage learning.

When race is the focus of building individual identity, we critically considered the racial composition of teacher/student associations and intersections in these responses considering the likelihood that these students were served by a teacher demographic that accounts for 65% White teachers and 22% Hispanic in the state of Texas (Bitterman, Goldring, and Gray, 2013). The influence of White teachers and dominant racial ideologies are evidenced in the responses, aligning with Picower (2009) and others who call for the importance of

Figure 1. Latina/o school administrators’ schooling experiences.
examining these critical intersections. Important to consider is Bernal, Knight, Ocampo, Garza, and Cota’s (1993) observation that Latina/o students are aware that schools are “social, cultural, and political contexts” (p. 135) early in their schooling experiences. In relation to students’ perceived interventions, the responses showed that in some instances, even when interventions were in place, neither students nor parents were fully informed about them. These responses

### Table 1. Latina/o School Administrators’ Negative Schooling Experiences.

- I was ability grouped
- Teachers would not help. I was discriminated and had donkey ears put on my head.
- When I was in first grade, my teacher used a ruler to hit me on my hands for speaking Spanish.
- Corporal punishment was administered for speaking other than English
- Many of my Hispanic classmates were tracked into vocational career paths
- There were low expectations
- There were no role models. Gangs were the only people one could relate with.

### Table 2. Latina/o School Administrators’ Positive or Negative School Supports.

- In Elementary school I was not allowed to speak Spanish and would get punished if I did. I was retained in the 4th grade because transitioning to English was hard for me. After I finally transitioned 5th-6th grade school was easy and fun for me. That’s why I chose both!
- We came back to the U.S. when I turned 8 years old. I was in third grade. I was moved to 1st grade because I didn’t speak English. The bilingual program had a sink or swim mentality. The rigor was not the same and I learned to be compliant.
- I attended school in Indiana and experienced much prejudice and loss of opportunity due to my “name.” It was often explained to me by teachers that if I had not been born in Mexico I would understand.
- Some teachers were kind; others were biased and showed favoritism.
- I was teased growing up because I was in the bilingual program.
- Environments lacking diversity or Latino groups were the most challenging as a student.
- I attended school. Did the best I could.
- Attended school in Mexico until 9th grade; completed high school in the U.S. As an English Language Learner (ELL) student, I was often sent elsewhere to work. This made me feel inferior.
- When in high school, I didn’t realize why I never made it into the top class. Later, I understood! That class was for monolingual English students only, not only top academic students.
- My transition to the U.S. was rough since I didn’t know the language. My parents and I had very little knowledge on how the system works. I was placed in very basic classes, based on my language barrier, which lowered my expectations. As a consequence I was not prepared for college and had to take remedial classes. This was discouraging at first but I finally overcame this setbacks.

### Table 3. Latina/o School Administrators’ Positive Schooling Experiences.

- I had some great teachers in certain grades.
- I had great, supportive teachers who truly cared about my education. They helped me overcome challenges and inspired me.
- I was pushed academically at home and school and I had a positive self-esteem of myself when it came to school.
- Since I was strong academically, I had a lot of teachers encourage me. However, there were times when some teachers put me down just because I am a Latina.
- White teachers didn’t always treat Hispanics the way they should have.
- I had teachers who understood me as a person, and as a learner who I enjoyed, but also had experiences with teachers who I did not like.
- Variation in expectations and teacher empowerment.
- Because my parents had it so unfair, my attitude was a more positive because I didn’t experience what they did in school. Although, thinking back, there were incidents that I would call not right.
- I enjoyed going to school. I did not realize the discrimination at the time. Now that I reflect on it I realize there were many instances of discrimination that I accepted since that is what I was expected to do.
- I was a migrant so I went to school in Texas and Louisiana. My parents did not allow for excuses so they always supported the school.
- Being the first generation born in the U.S., my parents had high expectations for me. I did everything I could not to let them down. I’m the eldest in my family, and my parents always reminded me that I set the example for my siblings.
- I experienced a wonderful but very sheltered matriarchal upbringing in the 60s in McAllen, Texas. I loved my barrio, La Paloma. Barrio back then had a positive connotation. That little barrio produced many first generation college students who are now lawyers, doctors, pharmacists, meteorologists, engineers, and educators like myself. Life was great as a 2nd generation Mexican-American. I did not know I was poor or a minority or bilingual until I came to Houston in the late 70s to go to college. Perception is everything.
confirm Cummins’s (1986) point about the importance of the need to improve not only interventions but also the relationships between educators and students.

**Latinas/o School Administrators Connecting With Students of Color**

Following on their intersectionality considerations in the development of a professional identity, we asked school administrators to reflect on the extent of their racial/ethnic background as contributing in connecting with the experiences of students of color (Figure 2). The rationale behind the connections of Latinas/os and students of color relates to observations made by Ferdman and Gallegos (2001), who argue that individual identity develops in the context of a group, or intergroup realities. This means that there is diversity not only in America but also within groups, such as Latinas/os. As we can find Mexican families who are indigenous to colonized states like Texas, as well as immigrant families from Mexico, we also acknowledge other backgrounds such as Puerto Ricans, Cubans, South Americans, and others, as families and children served by Latinas/os. The heterogeneity is often ignored, where “glossing over identifications based on national origin can be problematic” (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001, p. 35). Hence, the importance to reveal whether Latinas/os would be prone to articulate if they identified with the experiences with students of color. Not surprisingly, their responses varied.

Seventy-eight participants recognized an intersection between their racial background and the experiences of
students of color (Likert-type responses 4-7). There was a representative response from participants who did not perceive their racial background as associated with students of color in their schools. Their identity has been explored by Ferdman and Gallegos (2001), who assert that some Latinas/os may carry an undifferentiated orientation, where they see people of color as “just people.” The authors explain that some Latinas/os may accept the dominant norms of the U.S. society and perceive to view people distinct from their racial or ethnic identity. Ferdman and Gallegos (2001) suggested that these Latinos may take a “color blind” perspective when considering their own racial identity. Moreover, these authors assert that when these particular Latinos encounter barriers, they attribute them to behavior rather than to race, racism, or their Latinoness. Studies in educational leadership may explain this behavior when recognizing race may compromise their own profession. For school administrators of color, they have to be very careful when recognizing their skills because the intent is not to further dismiss instances of discrimination but to address inequalities. Nonetheless, those who responded not perceiving a connection between their own upbringing and potential connections with students of color added comments as shown in Table 4.

Those indicating their racial background as contributing to an understanding the experiences of students of color added comments as shown in Table 5.

The implications of race in the development of a school leader’s professional identity are indeed complex as demonstrated by the responses. Language and kinship were seen as benefits. There seems to be more to be learned about a connection between Latina/o administrators and students. For example, Ferdman and Gallegos (2001) questioned what factors lead to each orientation. In consideration is that much still needs to be explored about “What is the role of variables [in developing an identity] such as external stressors, perceived threats from others to oneself, or to one’s group, relationships with other people, language use, and ability, phenotype, and family composition?” (p. 54).

Latinas/o School Administrators Capitalizing on Race/Ethnicity

Considering the school administrators’ experiences in schools, the NLLP survey sought to examine the participants’ preparation as a school administrator. For the most part, a large majority of participants responded they felt prepared for the position. Seventy-five percent of those surveyed indicated they felt well or very well prepared for their first administrative job. Within their preparedness, we asked a question that would include race/ethnicity in their preparation, which brings together their experiences. We asked how the Latina/o school administrators perceived their race and ethnicity background as benefiting their work. In a previous NLLP national study, school administrators were divided between those who perceived race/ethnicity as a barrier and those who did not. In studying Latina/o administrators in Texas, we found a similar pattern where respondents were divided about their race/ethnicity as benefiting their work. Murakami et al. (2016) found similar concerns about those indicating a void between their race/ethnicity background and their position. Respondents in the Texas study were divided in recognizing how their racial/ethnic background been a benefit in their work as administrators. This question provoked a larger range of both likert-type and open-ended responses, as it connects upbringing experiences and the development of a professional identity (Figure 3):

When school administrators were asked whether their race/ethnicity background benefited the work of school administrators, more than 12% of respondents indicated that race/ethnicity did not benefit them as professionals. Those responding not at all (Likert-type option 1) did not add open-ended comments. Eleven percent of participants responding that race/ethnicity was not necessarily benefiting their work (Likert-type options 2 and 3) added the following open-ended comments:

Fifteen percent of participants were neutral in perceiving if race/ethnicity benefited their work. It is clear that some of the leaders that completed the survey are not aware of how their own racial and ethnic identity impacts their work as school leaders. Their open-ended comments included the following:

More than 60% of respondents perceived race/ethnicity as benefiting to some degree (Likert-type options 5, 6, and 7). These school administrators added an overwhelming number of comments when compared with other options in this...
question. In their open-ended responses, Latina/o school administrators suggest a strong connection between their race/ethnicity and their professional identity as school administrators especially based on (a) common upbringing, (b) common language and culture, and (c) being a role model.

**Common upbringing.** The respondents recognized that students and parents felt connected to them due to their racial/ethnic background. They included comments such as follows:

**Common language and culture.** Latina/o school administrators demonstrated that language and culture were assets they brought to parents and students. Comments as detailed in Table 9 included the following:

In the last two sections, it is clear that the leaders’ lived experiences have provided them with the ability to comprehend and recognize the diverse backgrounds of their students. This is noted as some leaders express the idea that they can see themselves in the lives of their students. Their capacity to see themselves in the eyes of their students connects these Latino school leaders with their students on a much profound level, which is beyond the conventional principal–student connection.

**Latina/o school administrator as a role model.** An important asset benefiting students, teachers, and parents related to the Latina/o school administrator as a role model (Table 10). Respondents perceived they could positively influence multiple stakeholders. Their comments included the following:

The question of how race and ethnicity background benefit the work of school administrators received an extraordinary number of open-ended comments. The participants felt more comfortable in responding to this question as opposed to the

![Figure 3. Latina/os race and ethnicity background as benefiting the work of school administrators.](image)
Table 6. Latina/o School Administrators Who Perceive Race/Ethnicity Background as Not Benefiting Their Work.

- I love all of my students regardless of race.
- I don’t feel my racial/ethnic background contributes to connections, or lack thereof, formed by students.
- I have rare opportunities to work with students of color but find no difficulty in doing so when the opportunity arises.
- I don’t really think that it helps, but it doesn’t hurt.
- It benefits when students feel that they are being picked on because of their color or race.
- I have not always been aware of this, but I believe some students have identified with me due to a common cultural heritage.
- My past experiences have given me excellent insight into the struggles faced by students of color.

Table 7. Latina/o School Administrators Neutral About Race/Ethnicity Background as Benefiting Their Work.

- I build relationships with kids and don’t pay too much attention to what color they are.
- Students and parents seem to trust my decisions.
- Parents appear to relate better to me.
- Although being Hispanic in a predominately Hispanic region, and I could use that to relate to the students, I believe it was more my socioeconomic status growing up that helped relate to students of the same economic status.
- Being able to speak both languages is a huge benefit to communicating effectively with parents.
- Familiar with the cultural “hidden rules” that helps me build relationships with all stakeholders.
- Being of Hispanic decent has allowed me to connect to the students of color because we are able to see commonalities or shared ground with respect to being minorities.
- I can relate linguistically and my personality relates to all ethnicities.
- I don’t believe me being Hispanic has affected how I connect with students. I attribute the way I am able to connect with students to my upbringing.
- It’s not about color. It’s about relationships.

Table 8. Latina/o School Administrators’ Connections With Common Race/Ethnicity Upbringing.

- I have been in their shoes.
- We have the same educational experiences.
- I often use my stories and experiences as the first person in my family to graduate from college to inspire my students.
- I have been able to rely on my experiences growing up and have been able to share with a few kids to prevent them from going down a wrong path. At the end of the day it’s about choice.
- The hardships and judgements I have personally been subjected to have been based on economic standing more than race/ethnicity.
- Based on some student’s background, they may see me making more connections and understand them better because our skin is the same color, however, what they may not initially realize is that the connections and interactions I have with students/teachers/parents are not dependent on race or ethnicity. It is dependent on the value I place on all humanity.
- The Hispanic population (which is over 85%) on my campus seem excited and happy and work extremely hard. I think that they feel that they can relate to me since I come from a similar background.
- Students enjoy hearing my stories regarding my past and overcoming obstacles.
- I was able to relay my personal experiences and successes to the families, students and teachers.
- I maintain a sense of identity with the families and having worked in industry for 16 years prior to education, I have been able to pragmatically build good relationships with minorities.

Table 9. Latina/o School Administrators’ Connections With Common Language and Culture.

- They see themselves in me and feel more comfortable talking to me in English or Spanish.
- My culture and traditions helped me connect with my students at my campus.
- Bilingual students can relate to my own personal experience.
- I live and work in a community with a large percentage of Hispanic families. Speaking Spanish and being Hispanic makes me more approachable for some families.
- Hispanic students can relate easier to Hispanic administrators.
- As with most situations when people speak a common language, Spanish-speaking students find me more approachable then the non-Spanish speaking administrators.
- Students see that someone of their ethnicity can make it. I can relate to their experiences.
- Most of the schools I served has been with students of the same ethnic background so I’ve been able to use my language and background in order to connect with students.
- Most of our students of color are from interracial relationships. It is easy to relate with them.
- Connections to culture. Also growing up in Dallas and attending Dallas ISD public schools has allowed me to embrace the variety of cultures of both the Hispanic and African American communities.
- This has been extremely beneficial because we have a commonality and usually I am able to relate to their background, customs, language, and other life experiences that are shaped by culture.
- I’m multiethnic and I believe that it has been to my advantage in working with all of my students.
Table 10. Latina/o School Administrators’ as Role Models.

- My background has been an advantage because it has allowed me to have perspective and empathy without facing a vast amount of personal prejudice and bias.
- Teachers of color feel like they can move up professionally.
- Being the only one of a very few in this position, I’ve certainly been a resource for students and parents.
- I empathize without feeling sorry for students, I show them that education is key to come out of poverty.
- Some students had never seen an administrator or teacher be of Hispanic background. It affirms to the students that anything is possible and that it can be done if they have a growth mindset.
- The students and parents love knowing that someone of their ethnicity is in a leadership role.
- It is a great plus as an administrator. They understand that I am like them.
- The majority of my student population is Hispanic. I connect to them as one of their own, however, more importantly I connect to them as a person, not just a Hispanic Principal.
- I make students understand that it is very possible for students of color to achieve.
- I believe some students who are minorities feel a sense of comfort and pride when they see that their principal is also a minority. I like to think I am a good role model for them.
- It is important for students to see various ethnic backgrounds in leadership roles. This allows them to relate to a leader . . . and to aspire to be one.
- There is a sense of connection and understanding. They trust me more than my other counterparts.
- Being Hispanic in a school that is 96% Hispanic has been a very positive experience and has allowed more parents to feel comfortable coming to school and being more involved. We still have a long way to go, but speaking the language and being able to relate to both students and parents has been a major asset.
- I think the students and parents feel that as a person of color they can communicate with me better than they can with others who are not of color.
- Students to me are “sacred” regardless of race or color. I am committed to making sure that all my students receive the best quality of education. Race is not an issue for me as an educator. I see all my students as my own children and I want the best for them.
- My background has been extremely beneficial in working with our students. It has helped me to connect and build positive relationships with my students.
- I am a role model, I feel like I am their dad—I treat them with respect and take care of them as if they were my own children. I am their biggest champion!
- I have had several Hispanic parents tell me that they are thankful I am at my campus. They appreciate the Spanish newsletters, emails and callouts.
- Since working at Title I campuses the make up of student population is usually Hispanic thus students can relate to seeing someone who look like them and speaks like them.
- More important than my racial/ethnic background helping to connect with students, is my belief than I must first show the students how much I care before I show them how much I know.
- Personal experiences are countless in the number of times both students and parents did not realize that I was bilingual. As a fair-skinned Hispanic, with an Anglo surname through marriage, they incorrectly assume that I am not bilingual. However, once the Spanish flows . . . all is appreciated and respected instantaneously.
- To be a Hispanic male has helped me as I work with many Hispanic students and families today. Students immediately understand that I have gone through many of the same experiences that they have been through growing up Hispanic. This places us on the same level as we speak about goals and overcoming obstacles. This includes other ethnic origins.

Discussion

The lessons provided by the findings in this research reveal that much is still to be explored about the impact of Latina/o school administrators. Their responses were rich in evidencing common early schooling experiences. These experiences were not often devoid of racism and discrimination. Despite these hardships, these individuals opted to have a career in education. It was important to remind ourselves of the low number of Latinas/os in administrative positions in the United States. Therefore, we recognize how this study could not include questions that could jeopardize their work.

Nonetheless, they were candid in recognizing how race and ethnicity affect their work. When race is the focus of building an individual’s professional identity, we also critically considered the racial composition of teacher/student associations and intersections in these responses. We especially considered the likelihood that these administrators, when children, were served by a teacher demographic that is less White, but still accounts for 65% White teachers and 22% Hispanic in the state of Texas (NCES, 2013).
The influence of White teachers and dominant racial ideologies are evidenced in the responses, aligning with Picower (2009) and others who call for the importance of examining these critical intersections. Important to consider is Bernal et al.’s (1993) observation that Latina/o students are aware that schools are “social, cultural, and political contexts” (p. 135) early in their schooling experiences. In relation to students’ perceived interventions, the responses showed that in some instances, even when interventions were in place, neither students nor parents were fully informed about them. These responses confirm Cummins’s (1986) point about the importance of the need to improve not only interventions but also the relationships between educators and students. We wondered whether teachers dealing with issues of discrimination among Latinas/os would consider that these children might want to have a job as a teacher and eventually become a school administrator in the future.

We hope this study can be further developed to include the preparation of teachers for delivering intervention programs that promote the success of Latinas/os and students of color. With the help of school administrators who once experienced these programs and interventions, ways to improve the experiences of Latinas/os in schools could be further explored. In addition, the positive influence of Latina/o leaders as role models of color merits exploration, especially because some of these school administrators sorely missed someone to whom they could trust when growing up. Similarly, an environment where school administrators do not feel threatened in their intent to support others to succeed as Latina/o teachers and school leaders is needed. To improve schools, mentoring future educators to positively impact their schools may be key to reducing racial and ethnic discrimination at all levels of the education pipeline, including professionals in education.

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