

## “LET’S SEE HOW LONG YOU LAST:” A Chicana Borderlands Principal’s Experience

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**Abstract:** *This testimonio is based on an autoethnography of the author’s leadership experiences as an elementary school principal in the South Texas borderlands region for twelve years. She focuses on three student-centered organizational practices: (a) culturally responsive leadership and teaching practices (Gay 2010), (b) teacher self-efficacy (Bandura 1993), and (c) sustained academic improvement (Klar and Brewer 2013) to analyze the intersectionalities of her leadership and culturally responsive practices. This testimonio is theoretically grounded on culturally responsive leadership theories. The author describes the culturally responsive leadership pedagogies that she used to develop teacher self-efficacy and students’ sustained educational improvement (Solórzano and Solórzano 1995). The implication of this autoethnographic testimonio is to share her contextual leadership practices with present and future school leaders.*

**Key Words:** *accountability, autoethnography, borderlands, Chicana epistemology, culturally responsive, leadership, teaching, teacher efficacy*

**This testimonio** narrates my leadership experiences as a Chicana borderlands principal at an elementary campus located in a south-side barrio along the US-Mexico border, a school with a history of high administrative turnover. Indeed, I began my leadership role as the fifth principal in a three-year span. Heidi, the school librarian, greeted me with a top-to-bottom visual assessment ending with a long sigh, exclaiming, “Let’s see how long you last.” I later identified Heidi’s clear doubt in my abilities to lead the campus as due to white supremacist and colonial ideologies that manifest in biases and stereotypes about race, ethnicity, and social class. Now, four years removed from the dozen years I spent at the helm of this educational site positioned at the geographic and symbolic borderlands so artfully illuminated by Anzaldúa (1987), I pen this testimonio to theorize how certain moments in

my own educational pathway culminated in the Chicana borderlands principal leadership style I employed. Rooted in the constructs of culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogies and practices and informed by my own cultural intuition<sup>1</sup> (Delgado Bernal 1998), I map out elements of Chicana borderland principal leadership. These include the following:

- a critical awareness of the social, emotional, financial, and academic injustices that have been perpetuated on Mexican American people by those in power, be they Anglo, Mexican people of European descent, and/or those Mexican Americans who deny their cultural heritage;
- culturally responsive practices that create a culture of resistance,<sup>2</sup> or foster ideological spaces<sup>3</sup> that counter the hegemonic Texas accountability system (Anzaldúa 1987; Delgado-Bernal 1998; Freire 1993; Giroux 1992; Gramsci 1995; Valenzuela, 2015) and reaffirm students’ racial, ethnic, and cultural identity and educability;
- an asset-based sensibility informed by the concept of community cultural wealth (Yosso 2005)
- a drive to advocate for high-need students’ academic success<sup>4</sup> (Delgado Bernal, Alemán, and Garavito, 2009), and
- a respect for the surrounding community that invites stakeholders to be fully invested in the school’s success (Boncana, Alemán, and Delgado Bernal 2014).

I chart moments from my own educational trajectory that shaped these aspects of a Chicana borderlands principal leadership to offer this example of a Chicana-based educational leadership style. I also document how I enacted this leadership, primarily by discussing how I worked with teachers consciously and critically to adopt culturally relevant teaching practices, encouraging them

to become allies in challenging deficit-based bias, misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes about Latina/o students, advocates for equity who resist high-stakes testing that delimit understanding of Chicana/o and Latina/o students' educability, and champions of Chicana/o and Latina/o student aspirations and racial, ethnic, and cultural identity. This account is offered with the intent of assisting future generations of Chicana/o and Latina/o school principals working in high-needs schools to lead and nurture a school culture of resistance successfully, exemplified by increased academic success (particularly Latina/o and Chicana/o students), minimized teacher attrition, and increased parental involvement. For many schools along the US-Mexico border, these measures can indicate a healthy educational environment that fosters increased educational attainment for the predominantly Chicana/o and Latina/o communities they serve, but due to many structural challenges, can be difficult to reach and maintain. To better flesh out these contours, I will first discuss the Chicana feminist epistemologies—specifically, *testimonio* and cultural intuition—that shape my leadership style and my narrative, by sharing the origins of my own educational journey. I also draw on my professional experiences to help define what I mean by the construct of Chicana borderlands principal, addressing each of the components of a Chicana borderlands principal and examples of it in action. Finally, I conclude with recommendations for aspiring principals.

### **Chicana Feminist Epistemology: Testimonio and Cultural Intuition**

At the core of my being is the desire to challenge and overcome institutional barriers to Chicana/o and Latina/o students' access to educational opportunities. As a first-generation Mexican American born along the Rio Grande River—a physical reminder of two distinct worlds—I learned to straddle the Mexican and American cultures from a very young age. I spent summers in Mexico with my grandmother every year until I turned fifteen. I grew up using both my grandmother's and my mother's *consejos* to survive

and negotiate difficult experiences in my life (Delgado Bernal, Elenes, Godinez, and Villenes 2006). Moreover, as a first-generation college student at a tier I state university, I encountered overt racism when my economics professor told me, “Why don’t you go back to where you came from? You are not going to be successful at this university.” That cruel experience motivated me to prove that professor wrong: I graduated from that university four years later, and I also motivated my three brothers and two sisters to follow in my footsteps and attend that university. In my own way, I opened the door for my siblings’ academic success. My mother says it best in Spanish: “Tu les abriste el camino a tus hermanos. Les enseñaste como lo tenían que hacer.” I am the eldest of six children, and luckily all of my siblings graduated from a four-year institution and pursued advanced degrees as well.

As principal, my intent was to make a difference in the lives of my students since my own life mirrored that of the students at my campus in many ways. For one, I grew up in the neighborhood where I was a school principal. Additionally, I was an English language learner (ELL), so I could share my experiences with a large number of students to help them become college-ready. I believe my conviction to recast students’ educability outside the mandated state-wide standardized testing systems originated from my own experience as a child from immigrant parents. Although I firmly believe that educational attainment is the path to financial stability, I also recognize that it is a lonely and challenging road on which to embark. For first-generation immigrant students, it is an educational path not traveled by their parents or anyone else in their immediate family.

Chavez wrote that “if schools are serious about successfully educating Latina/o students and other students of color, the autoethnographic texts from a Chicanas/os/Latinas/os who ‘made it’ could uncover factors that led to such ‘success across the educational pipeline’” (2012, 346). In addition, Elenes

described the importance of the Chicana testimonial texts in destabilizing the hegemony of Western academic knowledge and notions of truth (2000). In fact, many Chicana scholars in education have used testimonio to share their own harsh experiences navigating through white supremacist, prejudice, racism, and colonial ideologies that manifest in biases and stereotypes about race, ethnicity, and social class in schools. Similarly, this testimonio is grounded in Chicana feminist epistemology and border pedagogy<sup>5</sup> (Calderón, et al. 2012; Chávez 2012; Delgado Bernal 1998) because my Chicana borderlands principal identity is informed by the navigational tools that I have learned from constantly juggling two cultures (Anzaldúa 1987; Carmona 2017; Elenes 2011). Within my borderlands identity, I draw strength, resilience, and knowledge from the consejos of Chicanas/os who have navigated through the same xenophobic institutional practices. At the heart of this testimonio is an illustration of how my own first-generation college experience motivates me to prevent other first-generation Chicana/o and Latina/o students from walking away, dropping out, or failing to achieve their potential in higher education because they did not know how to cope with racism.

Another vital Chicana feminist theoretical construct for this project is Delgado Bernal's notion of cultural intuition (1998), which accounts for the ways personal experience, community memory, collective experience, professional experience, academic research, and theorizing produce "a critical, social justice approach" (Calderón, et al. 2012, 516) to Chicana feminist research. Since this notion was introduced, it "has been expanded in ways that queer, indigenize, decolonize, and spiritualize the research process," (Calderón, et al. 2012, 527) and is understood as a dynamic construct. While the elements that inform the research process continue to grow, it has yet been used to articulate how this embodied knowledge can also inform leadership practices of an educational administrator. As the testimonio I offer here demonstrates, many of my daily decisions in this

position were indeed guided via the lens of Chicana cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal 1998), especially the collective experience of marginalization.

For instance, my Chicana intuition is informed by the long history of injustices that people of color—people like me—have endured. I understand the social, emotional, financial, and academic injustices that have been perpetrated on Mexican American people by those in power, be they Anglo, Mexican people of European descent, or those Mexican Americans who deny their cultural heritage. Together, my personal and professional experiences have given me the navigational capital to strengthen my resilience to confront racism within educational structures (Giroux 1983; 1992; Yosso 2005), including as an educational leader. I committed all my efforts to ensuring that students in my school did not experience discriminatory practices like I did. I thus extend the notion of cultural intuition to include the ways I draw from this source of knowledge to make the leadership decisions required to run an elementary school.

### **Becoming a Chicana Borderlands Principal**

When I began my journey as a principal, I was poised to lead a campus that was struggling with the academic achievement of underprepared/underrepresented/underserved<sup>6</sup> Latina/o students. I drew on my mother’s words to guide my work: “Tú nunca le has tenido miedo a los retos. Nunca te has dejado vencer, tú puedes.” My mother’s consejos are part of my moral compass, and part of how I began to develop my Chicana borderlands principal leadership. To further ground my leadership as a Chicana borderlands principal, I share milestones along my journey that helped me cultivate my dedication to culturally responsive practices that reaffirm students’ racial, ethnic, and cultural identity and educability and create a culture of resistance that counter the hegemonic Texas accountability system (Anzaldúa 1987; Delgado Bernal 1998; Freire 1993; Giroux 1992; Gramsci 1995).<sup>7</sup>

Guajardo, Guajardo, and del Carmen Casaperalta (2008) chronicled the experiences of a first-generation college student, mapping out how that individual's narrative is informed by the difficult experience of moving from working class to middle class professional. My path was similarly fraught with these types of challenges. For instance, I initially felt empowered to navigate my new college campus until I encountered discrimination. Moving away from the homogeneous community I called home to go to a college where I was not welcomed was a debilitating experience. As a result, I needed help to survive and prosper. Fortunately, two individuals helped me survive my first year of college. Miguel and Francisco Guajardo were undergraduate peers who gave me *consejos*, *amistad*, and *protección* to survive the racially hostile college campus climate (Anzaldúa 1987).<sup>8</sup> My experience is not an isolated one. First-generation Chicana/o and Latina/o college students today still struggle with not knowing how to navigate the structures of the American education system. According to Luna and Prieto (2009), "because the university environment is designed to meet the needs of mainstream youth, ethnic minority students may not possess the prior experiences or information necessary to well prepare them for integration into the university environment" (223). Therefore, my experience led me to see the need to invest time and effort in helping Chicana/o and Latina/o students understanding how to transcend bigotry, discrimination and deficit-based views of their educability.

During my undergraduate university experience, I was selected as a Ford Foundation Fellow, and attended a seminar with fifty other Chicana/o and Latina/o undergraduate students from across top-tier universities in the United States to receive leadership training and mentoring. During those leadership seminars, I was introduced to José Angel Gutiérrez, one of the founding members of the La Raza Unida Party. During his presentation he explained the concept of hegemony. Before this, I had never heard that term. Gutiérrez told us that

hegemony meant the domination and control of one group of people over another. His explanation opened my eyes to my new reality, navigating in a different world far away from my home town. Finally, I had a name for what I was experiencing. In my hometown, I was not a minority. Everyone around me looked like me. The realization of standing out and being so different from those around me changed my outlook on life. I share this personal experience to illustrate my commitment to culturally responsive pedagogies. While school principals are not typically in classrooms, they ensure what curriculum is being taught and oversee how students are being taught. In order for students of color to be successful, teachers need to care and differentiate instruction to account for the specificity of their experiences as racialized and minoritized students. My role as principal, then, was to work with teachers and staff so that they understood and honored Chicana/o and Latino/a students’ cultural identity and the inequities they faced.

During my freshman and sophomore years in college, two other formative experiences led to my Chicana borderlands principal leadership. The first was an internship I spent shadowing Dolores Huerta, vice-president of the United Farm Workers (UFW). She taught me how to ser una mujer fuerte y bien centrada. Sus consejos me ayudaron a creer mas en la importancia y responsabilidad que yo como una mujer Mexicana que tenia la oportunidad de estudiar y prepararse no podia olvidarme de mis raíces. As Huerta’s intern, I learned about her experiences as a grassroots leader and her alliance with César Chávez. I visited different community centers in Austin, Texas, where we registered voters. These experiences informed my leadership decisions because I learned how these prospective voters’ shared vision and commitment to our country’s democratic ideals helped me understand the value of advocacy. Their passion for emphasizing the importance of education and resistance are at the core of political and educational participation against hegemony. I also quickly became aware of the inequities endured by Chicanas/o and Latinas/os in cities across



the United States, since Huerta frequently pointed them out in her teachings. I believe that as a result of my experiences with Huerta, I learned to advocate for women and Latinas/os. She taught me how systemic injustices could be confronted, and how we need to hold those in power accountable.

Additionally, I also interned with Ernie Cortés, Jr, co-director of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). Cortés showed me the process for grass-roots organizing and working with community women, teachers, pastors, and students to nurture and cultivate their leadership skills and self-advocacy. His teachings also contributed to my beliefs in advocacy and justice and community service. Almost ten years after working alongside Cortés, I found myself in the Dallas Public School system as a bilingual education teacher in a predominately Latino/a immigrant community. The school was the center of this small inner-city community and a neighborhood church I volunteered at partnered with a community organizer affiliated with the San Antonio, Texas based Community Organized for Public Service (COPS), led by none other than Ernie Cortés, Jr. During my years teaching at this campus, I became an advocate and community organizer, assisting Latino/a parents with school related operations like parent-teacher meetings translation services. I also addressed parent concerns about whether to place their children in heterogeneous or homogeneous class groupings, as some Latino/a parents preferred to have their children in Spanish-only classrooms because they wanted them to maintain their native language instead of being transitioned to English instruction.

Where I come from and the experiences in my personal and professional lives ultimately informed my leadership style. Reflecting on those moments, I conceptualize a Chicana borderlands principal as a culturally knowledgeable school Chicana-identified principal who teaches in educational sites located along the Texas-Mexico border (or other symbolic borderland spaces) and

utilizes a Chicana’s cultural intuition (Delgado Bernal 1998) to provide the Chicana/o and Latina/o students in her school with the navigational capital (Yosso 2005) to successfully journey within biased and inequitable educational systems. My daily leadership decisions were informed by the concept of community cultural wealth,<sup>9</sup> and my personal desire to advocate for high-needs students<sup>10</sup> academic success (Delgado Bernal, Alemán, and Garavito 2009). The next sections map out the four ways I carried out this leadership practice, including supporting teachers to consciously and critically adopt culturally relevant teaching practices, advocating for equity, resisting high-stakes testing that delimit understanding of Chicana/o and Latina/o students’ educability, and affirming Chicana/o and Latina/o students’ aspiration.

### **Culturally Relevant Leadership Practices**

Jiménez (2012) would use a sociological framework to describe my early leadership trajectory as “a continuous and regular accomplishment achieved through everyday practices. Doing leadership is not ascribed or static, but rather an action, a process that is relational, non-authoritarian, and non-hierarchical” (82). As a Chicana borderlands principal, my leadership decisions were methodical and focused on cultivating and sustaining a culturally relevant learning environment. In that respect, I developed a style of leadership that was grounded on creating a caring community—one that minimized deficit-thinking about Chicana/o and Latina/o students.

This conviction was rooted in my own elementary school experiences. My first-grade teacher isolated me from my peers because I did not know English. Later, as a college student, a White college professor explicitly told me “go back to where you came from because you are not going to make here.” As a result of these microaggressions, I was determined to use students’ funds of knowledge to empower them by way of culturally relevant teaching and

leadership practices (Gay 2010; Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez 1992; Pierce 1995). Moreover, I used my navigational capital and first-generation Mexican American survival skills to traverse this world with persistence and resilience (Delgado Bernal 1998; Delgado Bernal, Alemán, and Garavito 2009). I clearly understood that my ancient “tools of survival language, religion, and family continued to sustain me” (Elizondo 1989, 212). López suggested that there is “a need to incorporate culturally responsive behaviors as a characteristic of good teaching” (2011, 354). Therefore, through culturally responsive leadership and teaching practices, I facilitated campus discussions on how to improve the academic achievement of our English language learner students by practicing culturally responsive practices that made our school a unique and special place for high-needs students.

In addition, it was important to ensure that all stakeholders cared for our immediate school community by not forgetting that children are human beings who need to be loved and respected as individuals (Nieto 2013, Valenzuela 1999; Yosso 2005). This is the human relationship component that can reconcile some of the ambivalence of a traditional school system (Delgado Bernal 1998). At this borderlands school, students’ academic needs were addressed by individualizing instruction. We nurtured their social and affective development. In other words, the students performed well because they felt loved, and respected by their teachers and principal (Scribner and Scribner 2001; Trueba 1973).

Thus, I helped to foster a school culture that nurtured students where they felt safe, loved, and respected, and because of this, their academic skills flourished. Some examples of how students were nurtured and supported were by providing free school uniforms if they needed them, free dental work (second and third graders) provided by local dentists, free tennis shoes provided by a local donor, and after-school transportation for students who

wanted to participate in extracurricular clubs. As a result of a decade-long effort by a group of parents lobbying a school board member, students received uniform vouchers from the local sports store. We then set up a storage room equipped with extra uniforms. To obtain free dental care for the students, I participated in grant writing and a partnership with the local community clinic. Dentists who were working on their clinical work could come to the school and provide the needed dental work for students. Since the school had a total of eleven school buses bringing students from different rural and remote areas, I negotiated with the district transportation department to transport students in-between the middle school and high school bus routes. The late bus pick-ups helped students participate in late after-school tutorials and in extracurricular activities. All of these efforts were initiated, spearheaded, and sustained with advocacy and persistence.

At the beginning of my principalship, it was not easy to change the teachers’ deficit thinking about the language challenges and economic situations Latino/a and Chicana/a students faced. To begin the process of unlearning to see them beyond these perceived disadvantages, I did extensive professional development. Together we discussed peer-reviewed articles<sup>11</sup> that provided a path to curriculum and instructional delivery that defied deficit-based ideas about Latino/o and Chicana/o students’ learning. The goal was to provide teachers with historical context regarding Texas inequitable schooling policies and practices. Together we outlined pedagogical models based on an ethic of caring and specifically addressed key elements of Chicana borderlands principal leadership: 1) a commitment to create relevant cultural and academic connections; 2) the desire to raise awareness of the educational inequities that plague Chicana/o and Latina/o students in Texas schools among the school’s stakeholders; 3) the need to recast students’ educability outside the mandated state-wide standardized testing system; and 4) prioritize student’s aspirations and cultural wealth (Yosso 2005).

I carefully assigned readings by grade levels and I met with faculty after school hours until we finished reading and analyzing the content. The goal of this professional development was to help teachers understand the importance of seeing and caring for their students for who they were as individuals. Gradually teachers began to see their students' learning potential. In addition, because previous administrators and teachers opposed the policies designed to foster bilingual education at the school, some teachers resisted implementing this pedagogy. Nevertheless, over time, teachers understood that if we were to make progress as a campus, they needed to become part of the team (Bartolomé 2004).

Today, as I look back to the twelve years that I spent as a school principal at that campus, I reflect on the day-to-day activities that required culturally responsive leadership action and focus. For example, because of the large English-learning population we served, 100 percent of the school's teachers were bilingually certified. Teachers were also part of this very community, with thirty of forty-seven teachers living within the school boundaries. In addition, faculty members stayed at this school because they felt respected and appreciated. For instance, I offered teachers flexibility in terms of allowing them to leave campus early for doctor appointments, come in a few minutes late in case of family emergencies, or leave if they had a parent-teacher conference to attend. Teachers also were allowed to enroll their own children at the campus. As a result, the school's attrition rate was less than three percent and was maintained like that for twelve years under my leadership. In fact, this was not a random occurrence but an enactment of the school culture that a Chicana borderlands principal creates: a school culture where the immediate community is valued, respected and where all the stakeholders including the school's teachers are fully invested the school's success (Boncana, Alemán, and Delgado Bernal 2014).

### **Transforming Educational Inequity**

As mentioned above, in my own trajectory through higher education, I have navigated and endured discriminatory institutional practices. I believe it is my responsibility to share my experiences with future generations of Chicana/o and Latina/o school principals. For example, as a first-year college student, I did not know how to handle overt discrimination because no one told me it existed. Due to my family’s limited economic resources, leaving for college was the first time I traveled out of my hometown and my only concrete experience with this ideology was in fourth grade, when an Anglo nun teacher at my public elementary school taught us about the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin in voting, public accommodations, public facilities, public education, federally funded programs, and employment. At the time, I did not feel affected by this legislation, as these segregationist practices were framed as eradicated. However, I now recognize that as educators of students of color, we do a disservice to them if we simply regurgitate these words as a lesson in history without an understanding of how discrimination happens institutionally and interpersonally. Students of color also deserve to be equipped with a skill set from which to defend against white supremacy, colonization, and xenophobia (Guajardo, et al. 2013).

One of the goals of a Chicana borderlands principal is to raise awareness of the institutional inequities of the schooling system teachers and Chicana/o and Latina/o students in a borderlands school are situated in. As such, I worked to critically challenge the pre- and in-service teachers’ pedagogy that leads Mexican American teachers to believe that the Texas educational system is a fair and just one. Despite a shared ethnicity with their students, the unconsciously held beliefs by the teachers at the school when I arrived led them to blame the students for their own disadvantages instead of blaming the oppressive aspects of the Texas accountability system (Bartolomé 1995).

As mentioned above, one of the ways I took on this challenge was to collectively read and share with faculty academic research on these historic disadvantages.<sup>12</sup> Collaboratively we practiced an ideology of resistance by reading about the inequalities within the educational system (Freire, 1993; Giroux 1992; Solórzano and Solórzano 1995). This allowed us to raise awareness that Texas public schools were segregated from 1930 to 1960 (Valencia 2000) until the landmark civil rights case *Brown v. Board of Education, 1954*, when school desegregation became a federal mandate. However, Lopez and Burciaga (2014) demonstrated that even though federal law ended segregation, it did allow desegregation challenges to be examined on a case-by-case basis, thus allowing for racism to continue to permeate society to the present day. They offer the *Keyes v. School District No. 1, Denver Colorado* case to show that society has not made much progress to end racial segregation.

In Texas and in most of the Southwest borderlands, schools “remained segregated particularly in large cities with bigger metropolitan areas” (Valencia 2000, 447). In addition, Reyes and Valencia (1995) conclude that, in Texas, (a) as the percentage of economically disadvantaged students increased, the percentage of certified teachers decreased; (b) as the percentage of White students increased, the percentage of certified teachers increased; and (c) suburban compared to urban schools tended to have a greater percentage of certified teachers—a discernible pattern throughout. Presently, Gándara and Mordechay (2017) urge policy makers and educational leaders to address the educational challenges and persistent racial and ethnic disparities that continue to undermine the educational achievement of Latino students in the United States. These educational conditions are exacerbated with normative cultural practices where students are expected to participate and behave according to normative standards (Gay 2010; Ladson-Billings 2010; Souto-Manning 2013).

My goal with these conversations was to help teachers cultivate a social justice identity, which Urrieta (2007) argues, means they work in counter-hegemonic ways to dismantle oppressive and normative teaching practices. My testimonio illustrates how a Chicana borderlands school principal who helps her faculty to build a social justice identity manifests a culture of resistance that challenges the status quo, confronts bias, and disrupts misconceptions, untruths, and stereotypes that exacerbate inequality and discrimination.

### **Navigating the Texas Accountability System**

Not only did I take on the task of helping my faculty become aware of this legacy of inequity, I also helped to raise a critical consciousness around standardized testing. Theoretically, using testing scores as an indicator of success is problematic because it fails to recognize that real learning is holistic and it takes time. Hargreaves and Fink describe this theory as “real learners have curves” (2012, 52). I personally had to face these contradictions every day.

The Texas style accountability system is founded on using one test to determine the students’ academic future. Valenzuela (2005) scrutinized the “Texas-style” accountability system as one that fails students of color and their communities by failing to accommodate the instructional and language needs of high-needs students.<sup>13</sup> The Texas accountability system uses a series of standardized tests known as the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, commonly referred to as its acronym STAAR. The STAAR tests are administered in all Texas public primary and secondary schools to assess students’ achievement and knowledge at grade level. McNeil has described this system as “an extraordinary culture of intimidation reminiscent of the old Soviet Union rather than a system inherited from Jefferson and Dewey” (2000, 269).



Given that we were situated in the state that pioneered such rigid standardized tests for the nation, it took twelve years of unlearning to create a collective culture that countered the hegemonic Texas accountability system (Anzaldúa 1987; Delgado Bernal 1998; Freire 1993; Giroux 1992; Gramsci 1995). Eventually, teachers rejected the notion that the future of the Mexican American students could be defined using one test (Gramsci 1995; McNeil 2000)<sup>14</sup> because they understood that their civic responsibility was to work with the students regardless of their academic challenges (Brown 2014; Palmer and Snodgrass Rangel 2011; Vioria 2013). I say eventually because creating a collective culture of resistance took patience, dedication, and guidance throughout all the years of my principalship.

### **Students' Aspirations**

My Chicana borderlands principal leadership was guided by my desire to use the community's cultural wealth and build the students' aspirational capacity (Yosso 2005). In essence, I wanted to provide students with the skill set needed to build futures out of their hopes and dreams and at the same time have a very realistic understanding of how to confront and navigate discriminatory institutional policies. To do so, I highlighted personal stories (my own and those of previous students) so they could realize that their families needed to be seen as treasures of cultural wealth. I had an opportunity to help them appreciate the sacrifices that their parents went through to send them to school. These individual connections made our relationships stronger. I used to tell the teachers, "If the students see that you care for them, they will perform for you." My strategy to nurture and instill pride in our students, teachers, and parents worked well. As a result, our school was never labeled as a low-performing school. Basically, I characterized this process as playing by the rules and not letting the system break your spirit or the self-esteem of the students. The teachers and I talked about

the students’ family problems, academic performance, and how to prevent disciplinary disputes. For example, all of the teachers were expected to keep a phone log. Teachers were asked to call parents and mention two positive comments about the student before they could initiate any conversation related to the student’s academic problems or misbehavior.

Students knew that if they had a problem they could ask their teachers to come and see me. All I did was provide them with the navigational tools to have confidence to advocate for themselves, using *consejos* (Delgado Bernal 1998). Ultimately, my vision translated into the school’s mission to help students understand they had access to rich experiences that constituted a treasure of cultural wealth and parlayed into skills, strategies, and ways of being that made them stronger as students in K-12, and eventually in higher education (Guajardo, et al. 2013). Presently, as a professor at the local university, I stay in touch with some of the students that I had as elementary students. This connection fills me with joy because I know my Chicana borderlands administrative leadership positively influenced their cultural heritage and enriched their social and aspirational capital (Pérez Huber 2009; Yosso 2005), allowing their academic dreams to become reality (Yosso 2005). For example, a network of academic support was initiated each academic year to provide students with the navigational capital needed to make the change from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school (Martinez 2012; Yosso 2005). Elementary and middle school counselors, and school administrators were present in these transitional meetings to share important information regarding individual students’ academic needs, especially special programs such as special education, Section 504, gifted and talented programs, and bilingual programs. In essence, “networks of individuals and resources available within one’s community can be considered sources of social capital” (Martinez 2012, 71) and I found ways to take advantage of that.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

In retrospect, the Chicana borderlands principal leadership practices I describe did not happen overnight. It involved drawing from my own educational, personal, and professional experiences to inform my Chicana intuition to pursue culturally knowledgeable practices that provide Chicana/o and Latina/o students with the navigational capital to successfully journey within biased and inequitable educational systems. These practices include supporting teachers to consciously and critically adopt culturally relevant teaching practices, advocating for equity, resisting high-stakes testing that delimit understanding of Chicana/o and Latina/o students' educability, and affirming Chicana/o and Latina/o student aspirations to create a culture of resistance that reaffirms students' racial, ethnic, and cultural identity and educability.

It took time and patience to make meaningful connections collaboratively with the students at the campus (Monzó and Rueda 2003; Nieto 1994; Scribner and Scribner 2001). Teachers and para-professionals were highly encouraged to use their commonalities like language, cultural understandings, and experiences to build relationships with students (Monzó and Rueda 2003; Yosso 2005). Building on the community's cultural wealth, students enjoyed the culturally responsive practice of individualized attention, and their parents commented that they enjoyed visiting the school where students were recognized and acknowledged by their name (Nieto 2013; Scribner and Scribner 2001; Yosso 2005). A positive outcome of creating community pride in our school was that students' disciplinary issues were also reduced. As a matter of fact, a key recommendation for future principals is to not only get to know each student and their names, but also and more importantly, their cultural assets (Perez, et al. 2009; Valencia and Black 2002; Yosso 2005).

To succeed in engaging a Chicana borderlands principal leadership style, administrators must have full support for any new initiative. Organizational and instructional change that focuses on meeting the academic needs of diverse students in any school campus must be gradual and modeled. Otherwise, failure to understand the importance of instilling cultural pride and affirmation for students’ diverse cultural backgrounds leads to inconsistent teaching practices that could potentially perpetuate deficit thinking models. Researchers propose that culturally responsive educators need to build bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived social and cultural realities (Valencia and Black 2002; Valenzuela 1999; 2015). Furthermore, Duncan-Andrade defines effective educators as a material resource.<sup>15</sup> In addition, culturally responsive teachers must use a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles in combination with acknowledgment and praise of their own and each other’s cultural heritages.

In retrospect, I think about my leadership role as a process of self-reflection and *concientización*<sup>16</sup> (Freire 1974) because schooling and educating are two different things. I see schooling as being compliant, non-changing; it means simply just following the same old normalized and institutional practices. But truly educating is giving students the educational tools they need to comprehend that socially and politically, they have to critically understand how to combat hegemony and racist inequalities.

My hope is that my testimonio contributes to the preparation and practice of school leaders working with underprepared/underrepresented/underserved students because when I became a school principal, I did not have access to this type of discourse in my principal preparation program.

This critical awareness is particularly important for principals who work with historically underprepared/underrepresented/underserved Latina/o students. I encourage preservice, novice, and practicing school principals who reject deficit theories about children no matter what their background, cultural practices, language, skin color, or belief system to use this testimonio as a resource to help them pursue this awareness in becoming successful principals in high-needs schools.

The purpose of this testimonio is to share my reflections as a former Chicana borderlands principal, who was evaluated based on the academic success of all the students, and who was driven by the mission to make sure that teachers were making relevant cultural and academic connections with their students. Furthermore, I would also add that genuine caring for the students is extremely important. An effect of mentoring and caring for our students must be complemented with good teaching practices (Drago-Severson 2007; Galindo 1996).

When I recall Heidi's welcoming comment—"Let's see how long you last,"—when I first entered the campus, I am proud to say I outlasted all the five previous principals. I strongly believe it was because I genuinely understood and advocated for the students. Through this testimonio, I share the struggles, survival, and pain engraved in my lived experiences and informed the unique leadership style that I reconciled to navigate through a hegemonic student accountability system in the state of Texas (Flores Carmona 2017; Gramsci 1995). It is my hope that present and future generations of Latina/o school leaders will use my recommendations in their daily work and recognize the challenges that shaped this visionary style and its implementation. In essence, I believe that the core values of those who seek to become principals are good. Most educators pursue this altruistic field with the desire to make a difference

and positively contribute to changing underprepared/underrepresented/underserved students’ lives. Importantly, I do not believe that only Chicanas/os can act as advocates for high-needs Latino/a students, nor is it realistic. White school principals outnumber Chicana/o and Latino/a principals: Of 90,000 principals nationwide, only 7 percent are of Hispanic origin (Hill, Ottem, and DeRoche 2016). The reflections of my leadership experiences as a Chicana borderlands principal here aim to help all school principals meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of Chicana/o and Latino/a students.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Delgado Bernal (1998) describes Chicana cultural intuition as a Chicana researcher's theoretical sensitivity informed by one's own personal experience, existing literature, own professional experience and the analytical research process.

<sup>2</sup> According to Giroux, "resistance points to the need to understand more thoroughly the complex ways in which people mediate and respond to the interface between their own lived experiences and structures of domination and constraint," (1983, 108).

<sup>3</sup> "Ideology more often than not manifests itself in the inner histories and experiences that give rise to questions of subjectivity as they are constructed by individual's needs, drives and passions, as well as the changing material conditions and social foundations of society" (Darder, Torres and Baltodano, as cited in Bartolomé 1995, 13).

<sup>4</sup> According to conventional wisdom derived mostly from quantitative studies, high-needs students are identified as students who have limited English proficiency, derive from a low socioeconomic background, are at-risk for not completing or dropping out of school. However, as a Chicana borderlands principal, I do not agree with that definition because it focuses on Latino/a students' deficits. In my opinion, and in my experience as a school leader, my responsibility is to unravel teachers' normalized teaching practices using culturally relevant leadership strategies. Latino/a students need to understand how they are labeled and viewed by the rest of society. Thus, having and leading with a culture of resistance framework means mentoring, and working with Latino/a students' understanding that they will need strong educational tools to counter racist ideologies that are supported by bias and stereotypes about race, ethnicity, and social class.

<sup>5</sup> According to Giroux (1992), border pedagogy has three theoretical considerations: 1) the category of border signals a recognition of those epistemological, political, cultural, and social margins that structure language of history, power, and difference; 2) it also speaks to the need to create pedagogical conditions in which students become border crossers in order to understand otherness in its own terms, and to further create borderlands in which diverse cultural resources allow for the fashioning of new identities within existing configurations of power; 3) border pedagogy makes visible the historically and socially constructed strengths and limitations of those places and borders we inherit and that frame discourses and social relations (28).

<sup>6</sup> Underprepared/underrepresented/underserved students are Latino/a students who are not prepared for the rigors of school work at the designated grade level whether it is Pk-12, or college. Underrepresented means that Latino/a students are not proportionally represented at the college and university level precisely because they have been educationally underserved due to limited economic resources, language barriers, and discriminatory or normalized teaching practices.

<sup>7</sup> Valenzuela, Angela. 2015. E-mail message to author, September 10.

<sup>8</sup> Guajardo, Francisco. 2015. E-mail message to author, March 3.

<sup>9</sup> Yosso (2005) described the concept of community cultural wealth as having six forms of capital:

Aspirational capital refers to building the hopes and dreams of Chicano/a children and taking their parents’ history of adversity and resilience to motivate them to pursue their education. Linguistic capital speaks to the varied skills of intellectual and language communication skills that bilingual students enter the schools as well as honoring their oral communication, art, written language. Familial capital is informed by the understandings of what composes a family unit in a Chicano/a household includes extended family members such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, and friends. Familial capital is “those cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition” (79). Social capital refers to the extended support groups that can share important information about how to navigate inside a school setting, apply for scholarships, or admissions to a university or simply employment, healthcare services or immigration assistance. Social capital is “networks of people and community resources. These peer and other social contacts can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society’s institutions” (79). Navigational capacity is the *consejos* given to young Chicanos/as by elders, and those who have experienced the American social institutions, about how to navigate in those systems. Navigational capital refers to “the skills of maneuvering through social institutions. Historically, this infers the ability to maneuver through institutions not created with communities of color in mind. For example, strategies to navigate through racially hostile university campuses” (80). Resistant capital relates to forms of strategies and behaviors that are critical to counter social and racial injustice.

<sup>10</sup> No Child Left Behind (2001) defines a high-needs school as “within the top quartile of elementary and secondary schools statewide, as ranked by the number of unfilled, available teacher positions; or is located in an area where at least 30 percent of students come from families with incomes below the poverty line; or an area with a high percentage of out-of-field-teachers, high teacher turnover rate, or a high percentage of teachers who are not certified or licensed.” Essentially, high-needs schools require teachers because they cannot fill job vacancies or retain teachers, or they have teachers who are not qualified or who teach in subjects outside their field. High-needs schools also serve communities of higher poverty rates, where classrooms are influenced by the difficulties of their students’ lives. Most high-needs schools are located in rural or urban areas.

<sup>11</sup> This is a list of the journal articles that were presented and discussed with teachers during professional development sessions: 1) Nieto, Sonia. 1994. “Lessons from Students on Creating a Chance to Dream.” *Harvard Educational Review* 64 (4): 392–427); 2) Perez, William, Roberta Espinoza, Karina Ramos, Heidi M. Coronado, and Richard Cortes. 2009. “Academic Resilience Among Undocumented Latino Students.” *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 31 (2): 149–81); 3) Reyes, Pedro, and Richard R. Valencia. 1993. “Educational Policy and the Growing Latino Student Population: Problems and Prospects.” *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 15 (2): 258–83; 4) Suarez-Orozco, Carola, and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco. 1995. *Transformations: Immigration, Family Life, and Achievement Motivation among Latino Adolescents*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press); 5) Valencia, Richard R. and Mary S. Black. 2002. “‘Mexican Americans Don’t Value Education!’ On the Basis of the Myth, Mythmaking, and Debunking.” *Journal of*



*Latinos and Education* 1 (2): 81–103; 6) Valenzuela, Angela. 2005. *Leaving Children Behind: How “Texas-style” Accountability Fails Latino Youth*. Albany: State of New York Press.

<sup>12</sup> “High Performing Schools Serving Mexican American Students: What They Can Teach Us” (Scribner and Scribner 2001); “Lessons from Students On Creating a Chance To Dream” (Nieto 1994); “Let’s Treat the Cause, Not the Symptoms: Equity and Accountability in Texas Revisited” (Valencia, Valenzuela, Sloan, And Foley 2001); “The State of Latino Education: A War against Ignorance” (Rodriguez 2004); “Mexican-American Students’ Perceptions of Teachers’ Expectations: Do Perceptions Differ Depending on Student Achievement Levels?” (Bae, Holloway, Li and Bempechat 2007); “Professional Roles, Caring and Scaffolding: Latino Teachers and Paraeducators’ Interactions with Latino Students” (Monzó And Rueda 2003); and “Constructing 21st-Century Teacher Education” (Darling-Hammond 2006).

<sup>13</sup> Valenzuela, Angela. 2015. E-mail message to author, September 10.

<sup>14</sup> Valenzuela, Angela. 2015. E-mail message to author, September 10.

<sup>15</sup> According to Duncan-Andrade, “an effective teacher is herself a *material* resource: an indispensable person who can connect schooling to the real, *material* conditions of urban life” (Duncan-Andrade 2009, 7).

<sup>16</sup> Freire (1974) *Concientización*, according to Freire, is a process by which both the oppressor and the oppressed are liberated from victimization in an oppressive system. It is a process by which men, and women rise from their social and cultural limitations to critical social consciousness.

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