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Advancing Women In Leadership

Gender, Culture and Language in School Administration: Another Glass Ceiling for Hispanic Females

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Women in administration face many challenges in their careers. When the additional characteristics of racial and ethnic differences are included, the challenges increase. The struggle to achieve fair representation and adequate advancement opportunities within school districts is a problem that disturbs minority women.

A review of the literature reveals little information on the experience of Hispanic female administrators. Most of the relevant literature deals with women in general. The studies that do address minority themes ground themselves in the African-American female experiences.

The U.S. government describes "Hispanics" as persons of Puerto Rican, Mexican or Mexican American, Cuban, South or Central American, or other Spanish ancestry. Many people from these backgrounds use Latino or their actual country of origin (Puerto Rican, Mexican, etc.) to describe themselves to others. For convenience, I use the terms "Latina" and "Hispanic" interchangeably in this study, although I know that some colleagues take exception to both terms and to the labeling and marginalizing that they represent.

To gain a deeper understanding of Hispanic women in administrative positions, I asked Hispanic female principals to respond to a questionnaire. Afterwards, I interviewed ten principals. I asked them to report their experiences in five domains: career advancement, cultural and ethnic identity, significant mentors, sexual harassment, and the cultures of the schools in which they currently work.

My goal was to investigate Hispanic female principals' common experiences, challenges, and victories. This paper is based upon the experiences of ten Hispanic female principals in Chicago, Texas and Wisconsin. The participants were five Puerto Rican, one South American, and four Mexican female principals. All are fluent Spanish-and English-speaking professionals between the ages of thirty-five and fifty; three have doctoral degrees; four are currently married, three are divorced, three are single, never

married. I interviewed each extensively to gain a richer understanding of her experiences.

Language, Gender, and Culture

The dual impact of language and culture emerged as both a source of success and as the reason for fear of failure as perceived by eight of the interviewees. The gender issue varied, depending on the community involved. High numbers of Latino families in the community impacted the gender issue in a different way from populations with lower numbers of Latino residents within the community. The Hispanic women interviewed for this study shared similar experiences in this area. Although they had the advantage of communication in the school community's native language, those interviewees who worked in communities with large Hispanic representations felt they had been placed there chiefly because they were Hispanic rather than because they were the best qualified for the position. In communities with smaller Latino representations, the gender issue of leadership weakness emerged. In several cases, parents questioned the quality of the school's educational program with a female principal at the helm. One respondent eloquently described her first challenge in the principalship as that of "having to prove yourself twice, first because you are female and second because you are Hispanic!"

When asked if speaking a second language and being familiar with the communities was of benefit to their leadership roles, their responses in this area ranged from having the advantage of communicating in two languages with their districts, especially those with high correlations of Latino populations, to the negative experience of having integrity and skills questioned on the premises of ethnic differences between Hispanic groups. Linguistic barriers were evidenced more by some than others. One respondent, who has a distinct Spanish accent, claimed that people sometimes speak in a louder voice as though if she does not understand. This makes her angry because she claims her accent has nothing to do with her hearing. She holds a Ph.D. and has worked hard to achieve her position but struggles with the way in which she is sometimes treated because of her strong Spanish accent and presence. She has also had the uncomfortable experience of being accused of preferring Puerto Ricans over Mexicans or other Latino groups.

The women protested the way in which their leadership was questioned in terms of gender and culture. This created a highly stressful work environment for the women who constantly had to prove themselves. One principal's greatest challenge was convincing the Hispanic males in her community and on her staff that she could handle gang-and drug-related issues. In another school the parents (minority and non-minority) began to transfer their children to other schools because they believed that the school's educational quality might go down with a female minority principal. Two of the principal's suggestions and ideas were devalued in public meetings. According to one respondent, when these ideas were presented later by a male coordinator from the regional offices, they were more readily accepted by the same audience.

Another area that was uncovered was the domain of intentional and unintentional injury due to racism or lack of cultural sensitivity on the part of colleagues and central office administration. Respondents felt their colleagues were insensitive to their culture or gender because of remarks and jokes expressed in their presence. Two respondents expressed their resentment of negative innuendo such as "muchacha," or "chica," which mean nothing more than girl. Comments about ethnic foods, dress, and music were also demeaning.

Other issues that emerged dealt with the participants' feelings of isolation due to lack of trust within the

educational system. This feeling of isolation threatened their self confidence in their own leadership. One respondent almost changed careers during one of these episodes because of the loneliness and stress she felt. The lack of a strong support system was another obstacle to which several women alluded.

These difficulties are not uncommon to administrators in general, but women (especially minority women), appear to face more challenges these areas. This may be expressed as a form of culture shock. Culture shock has been defined as the set of emotional reactions to: the loss of reinforcements from one's own culture, new cultural stimuli which have little or no meaning, and the misunderstanding of new and diverse experiences (Adler, 1975).

Most disturbing to this researcher was the way in which the truth of the painful experiences of these was cloaked to avoid dealing with the reality of what they were actually experiencing in terms of sexual and racial discrimination. Although they knew their leadership skills were questioned unfairly by their superiors, they learned to get around these painful issues and move on even though they had not been vindicated. While this may be referred to as developing a "thick skin," it seems as though the women had placed masks over their beings and somehow had forgotten to remove them at the end of the day. According to Sanford (1970), the mask is the person we pretend to be, the false outer personality which we turn to the world, but which is contradicted from within. The mask is that which conceals our real thoughts and feelings, which we come to use so habitually as a way to hide from others and ourselves that we become unaware we have assumed it (p. 95). Sanford further states that we begin to identify with the mask and start to believe we are the person we pretend to be and are, thus, unable to identify with our real self.

The reason this was such a disturbing finding to me was that it forced me to take a good look in the mirror. As a female administrator, I too, had learned to hide these painful experiences so deeply that they were not dealt with at all. Some principals had ignored and gone so far beyond the incidents that they had forgotten that they had actually occurred.

Professional Promotion

When the principals were asked about their current positions and future career promotion opportunities, the answers were varied and, in some cases, surprising. One respondent felt that she had been placed in her position because the school district had a high influx of Hispanic students. Although she had excellent credentials and a doctoral degree from a reputable school, she felt her placement there was pure tokenism. She claimed her perception would have been different if she had been placed in a less segregated school. She also noted that in her district there were no superintendents or other key positions held by Hispanic *or* female professionals. Deitz (1992) touches upon the view of this respondent when she states that people continue to hire in their own images and when they do that, they hire people who are not Hispanic. Simply from a traditional decision-making viewpoint, Hispanics are not sought out often, and when they are sought out, they are sometimes sought out in a token fashion, without any real desire of making an appointment (p. 6-8).

One respondent felt that she acquired her position because of luck, or being in the right place at the right time. She knew she had leadership skills and talents but could not talk about them specifically. It was hard for her to see or describe herself as the most qualified for the position. Several respondents felt they had achieved the opportunity to become principals because of early retirement initiatives in their districts.

Career Advancement

Getting to "know thyself" as a leader seems to be key to dealing with the dilemma of casualties in leadership. Accurate self-assessment is absolutely crucial to leadership success; however, for the female Hispanic it is culturally inappropriate to sing her own praises. The interviewees had difficulty specifically citing their leadership strengths and skills, and they attributed much of their success to teamwork of staff and parents. It was difficult for them to attribute their success to their own contributions. This might be misinterpreted as a lack of self-esteem by superiors. The Administrative Portfolio would serve as a tool for these Hispanic women administrators who are reluctant to portray their successes and accomplishments to conduct an accurate self-assessment. The Administrative Portfolio, as suggested by Brown and Irby (1995), is an excellent technique for self-assessment (p. 190-193). It offers administrators an overview of where they have been, what they have done, and what they need to be doing. Brown and Irby suggest that, along with artifacts and reflections, transcripts, letters of reference, a five year plan, personal philosophy of education, samples of workshop certificates, and thank you notes from administrators, parents, and students be included in the administrative portfolio. Besides being a reliable tool to use in to a job interview, the administrative portfolio can provide the Hispanic female administrator documentation over time of her very real skills.

When mentoring prospective female principals, much of the interviewees' advice dealt with knowing strengths and weaknesses as leaders. Joining key educational organizations that foster and encourage Hispanic administrator's development, as well as those organizations that offer positive networking opportunities was highly recommended. One respondent expressed the importance of her mentor's role in her own mental health. She was advised to stay current on the latest research as well as the occasional reading of a good novel. This gave her a good sense of culture and helped her to relax, enjoy, lighten up and not take herself so seriously. Understanding the majority culture and its politics, including the "good old boy network," was also advice she had received from mentors and now passed on to others.

Status and Positions

One common theme that surfaced during the interviews was that minority women tend to play several roles in their positions as administrators. On the one hand, they are expected to represent their ethnic group. They felt their ethnic groups were watching them closely and would be quick to condemn them if they behaved "too Anglo."

These women also felt their colleagues and central administrators were always watching and that they would be viewed as "outsiders" if they behaved "too Hispanic." Their performance as leaders was always under the watchful eye of others, and they were quick to be judged based on their femininity and ethnicity. Another role conflict they perceived was that while they are expected to behave as "ladies" on their jobs, this expectation contributes to perceptions of vulnerability and weakness *because* they are women. Getting angry or being assertive is acceptable for a male administrator, but if a female administrator behaves this way it must be because it is "that time of the month." Menstrual cramps or pregnancies were cited as possible reasons for the perception that women could not be effective in their jobs.

Racial and Sexual Discrimination

Although all except one of the respondents acknowledged sexual discrimination was present in their district, none of the participants was overly concerned about this issue. According to Brilles (1995) sexual discrimination may be expressed physically, verbally, or non-verbally. One respondent had experienced sexual harassment by way of jokes that demeaned women. These jokes were related by male administrators and colleagues in her presence. Although she asked them to stop, they continued, so she walked away. Since then, communication between male colleagues and this

respondent have been somewhat "cut off." She expressed a sense that they view her as a prude and don't see her as a "team player," a situation that she feels may have a substantial negative impact on her support system.

Another respondent related an incident she experienced at a principals' meeting. She has an Italian last name, although she is Puerto Rican. A fellow principal had a complaint about "those" Puerto Rican and Mexican kids transferring into his school. After some nasty remarks about "those" kids, he asked if she had been experiencing the same problems at her school. A little embarrassed, she replied that she had been one of "those" kids when she arrived from Puerto Rico to study on the mainland and went on to share some cultural information to help him understand the children's behaviors he had alluded to in his remarks. He apologized for having possibly offended her, and he thanked her for the information. He still calls her from time to time. Not all Hispanics will respond or behave as this respondent did. Anger or alienation are probably more typical reactions.

The successful women administrators interviewed utilized the worst situations they encountered by creating opportunities to teach and lead others into understanding. No longer could people around them plead ignorance for their lack of cultural sensitivity. They held those around them accountable for their actions. Their fear and anger changed from internalizing to expressing to others understanding of why their actions are unacceptable or inappropriate. This was an advantage in their networking with others. As female Hispanic principals continue to increase in numbers, they will deal with cultural and language discrimination issues on a more frequent basis than their female non-Hispanic colleagues. Like other women, Hispanic women may experience different treatment because of their gender, but, in the case of the Hispanic woman, being both female and culturally different will often result in double discrimination.

Implications for the Future

As school districts continue to meet educational needs of the large influx of Hispanic students, more emphasis should be placed on hiring school administrators in key positions that better reflect the ethnicity and cultural identities of the student population. According to a 1991 article in the New York Times, Chancellor Joseph A. Fernandez of the New York City's Public School System pushed for increasing the number of Black, female, and Hispanic principals who could serve as role models for their students (Metropolitan News. p. B1 and B5). In 1995 the Chicago Public Schools had a total of 123 Hispanics in administrative positions, including facilitators, principals, assistant principals and regional officers. In 1996 that number grew to 140. Hispanic female principals made up 42 of the group in 1996 and Hispanic male principals made up a total of 27 of those numbers (1996).

Results of this study point out that Hispanic female principals do not want to be considered "outsiders" by their colleagues; they seek entrance into leadership positions and acceptance by the majority culture. Condescending attitudes and tokenism, once they are detected, are destructive to positive working relationships. In seeking to "know thyself" or what their leadership styles are, it behooves all women to become knowledgeable about the majority culture in which they work. Women will play a significant role in the administration of education in the future, and more effort needs to be expanded in support of females in key leadership positions, including women of differing cultures and language, so that their successes can become the successes of American urban education.

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