

Leadership for Chicano/Latino Education and the Politics of Change

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, I situate a discussion on Leadership for Chicano/Latino education that is grounded in a history of resistance and activism among these same communities generally, and in particular acknowledging the contributions of Chicana feminist scholarship. Second, I discuss how the topic of Leadership for Chicano/Latino education is mired by a broader political climate that must be acknowledged in scholarly analyses of education and leadership, as well as the pedagogical approaches applied in leadership preparation. This discussion includes the argument that Leadership for Chicano/Latino education must go beyond a pedagogy and epistemology of *supervivencia* (survival)—one's singular ability to endure and thrive in systems of oppression (see Galván, 2014)—if we are to prepare transformative leaders equipped to traverse a political climate overwhelmed by anti-Chicano/Latino sentiments and a diminishing investment in public and higher education.

Introduction

Today, Latino/as account for one in two people added to the U.S. population (Fry & López, 2012) and there is no better visual for this demographic shift than public school classrooms. While the representation of Latina/o students continue to climb and outpace other peer groups, mainstream discourses guiding policy debates, curriculum and instruction, and the overall education of these students continues to ignore the assets, needs, and knowledge of this growing population. This disconnect is joined by a political climate overwhelmed by anti-immigrant and anti-Chicano/Latino sentiment, voter suppression efforts, and a diminishing investment in public and higher education. These broader circumstances add to an ongoing marginalization of Chicano/Latino communities from social and political life—arguably beginning with their experiences in our public school system. In the context of critical leadership for social justice, I echo the significance of Darder's (2015) call for scholarship and pedagogy to shed light on systematic forms of oppression—namely market-based reforms—

that further erode culturally democratic principals in education and broader society. These analyses are useful for understanding how the ongoing entrenchment of these systems impact leadership preparation and the limits and possibilities of critical leadership practices in K-12 settings.

No longer is it the case that education is defined by a “challenging” goal to meet the needs of a small sector of Chicano/Latino students. Rather, current data and future projections clearly underscore that Chicanos/Latinos are increasingly the face of public education—comprising the fastest growing segment in U.S. public education—and already the overwhelming majority in larger, populous states (Fry & López, 2012). Educational gains in high school completion, college enrollment, and degree completion among Chicano/Latino communities are at a numerical upswing, though these gains have not kept pace with the proportional growth among the Chicano/Latino school-aged population who today.

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This article draws upon three sources of knowledge. The first is a cursory portrait of scholarship highlighting the historical role of Chicano/Latino communities’ engagement with the topic of leadership in education. Second, I build upon the arguments articulated by Antonia Darder’s (2015), “*Critical Leadership for Social Justice: Unveiling the Dirty Little Secret of Power and Privilege*,” to underscore broader political factors informing higher education’s role in preparing K-12 leaders. Finally, I draw upon my own research findings from a five-year study examining whose knowledge is privileged in educational decision-making processes—and whose knowledge is not—and the roles that external (monied) interests play in circumventing Chicano/Latino communities’ historical struggle for educational justice (López, 2012, 2016a;

2016b). As part of this scholarship, I highlight important epistemological and empirical nuances related to issues of power, privilege, and educational leadership that are rooted in a *testimonialista* perspective as researcher and participant in the legislative arena (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Carmona, 2012).

An Epistemology of Resistance and Activism in Education and Leadership

Engaging education as a political system and basing its efficacy on the capacity to extend justice and self-determination to historically marginalized peoples is an important and historical component of Chicano/Latino activism (San Miguel, 2013). While these efforts arguably go back as far as the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the Civil Rights Era surely marked a significant moment when historically marginalized communities generally, and Chicano/Latino communities specifically, forged deliberate conversations on the need to interrogate the U.S. public education system (Donato, 1997; San Miguel, 1985). These discussions include rejecting racial/ethnic and linguistic segregation and assimilationist approaches to classroom instruction, fighting for bilingual education, fair and adequate school funding systems, affirmative action, and even developing Chicano/Latino-centered schools (Acuña, 2006; Trujillo, 2011).

Operating through a lens of resistance and activism, Chicano/Latino communities informed a focused action plan that was expressed in *El Plan de Santa Barbara* and the priorities put forth by Chicanas during the 1973 National Women's Political Caucus Convention (Delgado Bernal, 1999). These agendas called for increasing the representation of Chicana/o educators and administrators, school board members, and broader elected and appointed leadership positions as a means for disrupting the status quo in education. Catapulting Chicano/Latinos generally, and Chicana/Latinas more specifically, into positions of power were arguably central to the goal of transforming public (K-12) and higher education systems, and by extension the socio-political standing of these communities. Going beyond a focus on mere presence of Chicano/Latinos in leadership, was the call to affirm Chicano/Latino identities and redistribute power and wealth. In the context of public education, this agenda contributed to a then early emergence of Chicano/Latino studies and critical pedagogy in education, particularly as a tool for increasing Chicano/Latino students' awareness of issues of power, oppression, and social justice activism (Acuña, 2006; Valenzuela & López, 2016). These demonstrations of leadership and epistemology of resistance and activism in education are further demonstrated

through student walkouts (Berta-Avila, Tijerina-Revilla, & Figueroa, 2011), courtroom battles (Valencia, 2008), policymaking (López, 2012, 2016a, 2016b; López & Moreno, 2015, 2016), and electoral politics (Gutiérrez, 1998)—all of which were deemed necessary to holistically transform the broader system of education.

Chicana Feminist Epistemology and Activism in Education

Adding to Chicano/Latino communities' historical role in education is the emancipatory approaches taken by Chicana feminist scholars. Writing from the margins, Chicana feminists have long engaged issues of power and structural factors that curtail educational justice and social change; yet these contributions remain marginal in the study of these same topics and subsequently how we understand the persistent disenfranchisement of Chicano/Latino communities (see López, 2012 for elaboration). Among many things, a Chicana feminist epistemology acknowledges how women of color commonly deal with the motivations that are closely tied to a commitment to improving social conditions, and being agents of transformational change—this position chooses to “construct theory and political agenda[s] for achieving social justice rather than only engaging in intellectual debates that deconstruct existing paradigms” (Hurtado, 1997, p. 215).

Chicana feminist scholarship has been historically committed to examining community struggles and power dynamics that includes theorizing their own agency and roles in transformational change (Cordova, 2005). This is particularly the case for scholars who hold coveted tenure/tenure-track positions in higher education (Latina Feminist Group, 2001; González & Padilla, 2008; Trujillo, 1997). Advancing Chicana feminist epistemologies in practice and scholarship (in part) involves two important elements: first, that examining Chicano/Latino communities' historical struggle for educational justice cannot be examined in isolation; and second, how Chicana feminist epistemologies take shape in practice are uniquely individual and often accompanied by collective commitments that manifest through the production of knowledge and social action (Hurtado, 1997).

A Chicana feminist epistemology informs my own work, namely a five-year analysis of whose knowledge is privileged in legislative decision-making processes, and whose knowledge is not (López, 2012, 2016b).¹ In particular, I am guided by Black and Chicana feminist notions of

¹ Data for this longitudinal study are comprised of numerous primary and secondary sources across various

intersectionality that acknowledge race-, gendered, and class-based dimensions of social and political life. Influenced by the work of Kimberly Crenshaw (1989, 1991), the concept of intersectionality as the various ways in which social constructs, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation simultaneously mediate how individuals and groups interact with institutions and broader society. This lens allows me to deconstruct the interplay of multiple experiences of exclusion and subordination among the people, practices, and politics that embody public policy and educational decision-making.

As part of the research process and my analyses, I reflect on my *testimonialista* status (see Delgado Bernal, Burciaga & Carmona, 2012) as researcher and participant holding privileged access to the inner workings of the state apparatus (López, 2012, 2016a, 2016b). This latter knowledge allows me to theorize my experiences and prolonged engagement in a manner that broadens understandings of the roles that power and privilege play in policymaking and Chicano/Latino education with an eye towards emancipatory, actionable change. Furthermore, this work contributes to the historical contributions of Chicana/Latina scholars in the production of knowledge and commitments to emancipatory and transformative change (Anzaldúa, 1987; Delgado Bernal, 1998).

Today, my positionality and privilege includes my status as a tenure-track, Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at a public, four-year California State University—a system that influences *who* obtains leadership credentials in higher and K-12 education. In this position, I have the ability to merge my scholarship, engagement with community organizing and emancipatory movements, and Chicana feminist epistemologies with the pedagogical approaches I put into practice when preparing educational leaders. A Chicana Feminist epistemology in the context of my classroom pedagogy allows me to model and ground leadership candidates in an approach that is responsive to a growing demand for K-12 teachers and administrators that are equipped to critically respond to issues of race, gender, class, ability, and sexual orientation as they relate to the academic trajectories of students generally, and

contexts, as follows: verbatim transcriptions of public legislative hearings; analysis of policy documents—i.e., public reports, bill analyses, research briefs, written testimony, public forum documents, and position papers from internal (i.e., government, state agency, and legislative committees) and external entities (i.e., academic entities, interest group, formal organizations); media clippings; participant observation; “elite” and key informant interviews with researchers, practitioners, civil rights and community members, state agency staff, legislative staff, and legislators; and field notes. This study orders data chronologically. Cases were developed based on time frames, or phases, that correspond with the Texas State Legislature’s policymaking process. All data were coded to identify themes, patterns, and corroborate findings.

Chicano/Latinos in particular. Finally, my motivation to merge these complex worlds and produce knowledge from a Chicana feminist standpoint rests on a commitment to expand our understandings of Critical Education Leadership, Chicano/Latino Education, and Chicana Feminist epistemology—particularly as it relates to issues of power and racial/ethnic justice.

Power, Privilege, and the Public Good

In the context of critical leadership for social justice, Antonia Darder (2015) sheds light on systematic forms of oppression—namely market-based reform and neoliberalism—that continue to erode democratic possibilities. Central to this analysis of critical leadership for social justice is the role of neoliberalism and higher education—a context mired by market-driven interests and colonizing paradigms that place profits before people. This entrenchment of neoliberalism similarly defines K-12 education and the circumstances that educational leadership preparation must negotiate, and by extension the limits and possibilities of critical leadership in practice.

As graduate students seeking credentials from university-based preparation programs, leadership candidates are required to traverse the gauntlet of neoliberal policy reforms that places managerialism and efficiency over public intellectualism and one's capacity to affirm transformative knowledge and practices (Lipman, 2011). This culture of control and governmentality has historically defined conceptualizations of educational leadership particularly in K-12 settings (Callahan, 1962). Leadership preparation is further influenced by faculty who embody diverse predispositions, motivations, and analyses of the climate of higher education and their positions within it (see Young & Brewer, 2008). These epistemologies arguably manifest into varied definitions of social justice and meanings of transformational change that leadership candidates take with them as they ascend into leadership positions.

According to Darder (2015), the neoliberal hegemony finds expression in policies and practices that reproduce racialized structures and by extension circumvent emancipatory struggles for justice. As part of a five-year analysis examining the agency of political actors in legislative policymaking, I set out to unravel the politics of *whose* knowledge is privileged in decision-making processes—and whose knowledge is not. In part, this scholarship highlights the growing influences of external, monied interests and corporate reformers who conceal increased authority over advancing market-based policies and infiltrating broader power

structures related to education, such as due process and electoral politics (López, 2012, 2016b). With regard to leadership, I reveal how the agency of educational leaders (i.e., school principals, district superintendents, agency and governmental staff) legitimate corporate reform agendas during decision making processes, particularly with respect to deficit understandings of Chicano/Latino youth and school and districts' approaches for attending to these communities' educational needs. These findings hold important implications for educational leadership and Chicano/Latino education.

Leadership for Chicano/Latino Education and the Politics of Change

For nearly three decades, neoliberal policy agendas like punitive accountability and high-stakes testing policies have inspired fundamental shifts in education and the academic trajectories of Chicano/Latino students. These systems, by design, are *never* without losers. Research has highlighted how these policies socially construct schools, educators, and students—particularly low-income, emergent bilingual, students of color—as mere failures based on reductive indicators (Haney, 2000; Valenzuela, 2004). This act of shaming schools and students has compromised educational equity for decades while playing into the hands of corporate reformers that capitalize on the ability to turn education problems into business opportunities, whereby embracing the educational needs of Chicano/Latino communities to the extent that they are profitable. Furthermore, these policy agendas continue to inspire privatization schemes that seek to circumvent elected governing bodies, repeal collective bargaining and educators' rights to due process, and lobby for changes in tax structures that further debilitate public education funding (López & Moreno, 2013, 2015). Rather than view these phenomena as new, scholars must situate these hegemonic practices of power within an historical analysis of ongoing subordination and disenfranchisement of marginalized communities generally, and Chicano/Latinos in particular (López, 2016a).

Public education's use of high-stakes testing has arguably become one of the most politically contentious issues and outgrowths of market-based reform. Moreover, these policies have taken shape in the form of teacher and leadership evaluation mechanisms currently under debate in numerous states and nationally. The use of high-stakes testing has been found to detrimentally impact the academic trajectories of students (Valencia & Bernal, 2000; Valenzuela, 2004) and induce teacher and administrator turnover due to the role that these systems play

on educators' job security (McNeil, 2000), all the while imposing political and sanctioning threats to the existence of neighborhood public schools (López, 2012). Furthermore, these systems reduce students to “cells” or indicators, associated to test scores that are subsequently used to measure the success or failure of schools and districts. This practice, by design, has been shown to influence deficit characterizations of students—as expressed in objectifying terms like “weakest link” and “bubble kids”—that absolve schools, while favoring corporate profiteers who swoop in and claim that they have what it takes to turn around students and the education system (López, 2012).

Given that educational leaders are increasingly required to traverse a political climate influenced by corporate interests, it's pertinent that aspiring leaders have the tools to analyze and consider the breadth of factors that influence the agency of relevant actors. These political dynamics have implications for how schools and the educational needs of Chicano/Latino students and communities are attended to, or not. For one, educational leaders have been shown to align with market-based agendas and discourses in politically risky moments, particularly as it pertains to sharing deficit perspectives on the capabilities of Chicano/Latino students. Two cases in point are during deliberations and decision making related to student curriculum and assessment policies, and the use of high-stakes testing.

During Texas' recent overhaul of its K-12 curriculum and assessment system—i.e., the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR)—changes to policy were initially written to include the use of fifteen high school exit exams, each tied to student's final course grades. While these changes drew outrage from obvious constituents such as teachers, parents, and civil rights and community groups, these responses were not matched among school administrators (i.e., principals and superintendents). In fact, administrators, as a block, responded with ahistorical and apolitical statements such as how the newly proposed system might pose “unintended consequences” by encouraging students to take an easier course load in order to lessen the total number of exams they would be required to take. In other instances, administrators advanced meritocratic perspectives by referring to the exacerbated testing system as a “motivator” that would ensure that students had “skin in the game,” whereby serving as a “pretty good incentive [for them] to try hard” (López, 2012; also see Mellon, 2007). These perspectives are problematic for students and the perceived viability of public education as they feed the legitimacy of punitive policy approaches at the same time that

they contribute to administrators' own demise.

When given an opportunity to forge a counter narrative that disrupts meritocracy and the growing status quo of neoliberal policy agendas, administrators' deficit ways of knowing carry a political cost in decision-making processes—particularly when they engage as a block. When these actors forge ahead with a mere focus on how exacerbated testing systems would be standardized and streamlined in practice, devoid of challenging the merits of empirically flawed systems, students and support for public education arguably experience a loss. This critique of administrators' deficit practices in decision-making processes must also be seen in conjunction with demographic shifts that emphasize the growing representation of Chicano/Latino students in K-12 education. As the fastest growing recipient of K-12 public education—and already the majority in large populous states—Chicano/Latino communities are an imminent constituency for market-based reforms. When leadership in (traditional) public education settings show little regard for humanistic treatments of this community, and students of color generally, we should not be surprised when they are baited—knowingly or unknowingly—by corporate interests and the [empty] promises of neoliberalism.

The persistent entrenchment of corporate interests and market-based reform epitomize the growing politics of change in K-12 education and the experiences of Chicano/Latino students and broader communities. Moreover, acknowledging these dynamics inform the broader, political circumstances that educational leaders must negotiate as they ascend in leadership positions. University-based leadership programs play critical roles when it comes to advancing a leadership *for* Chicano/Latino communities that equip candidates with a counter narrative analysis that allows them to first understand these realities, and then identify the strategies they must develop if they are to disrupt the talons of corporate interests in and out of education.

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