

Equity for English Learners: Latino Leadership in High-Need Middle Schools

Stephanie Zamora Robles

Midwestern State University

Abstract

The role of the principal in high-needs schools is vital to the success of the organization. Middle school principals play a critical role in fostering a safe learning environment as middle schoolers navigate socioemotional development alongside academic demands. High-need schools are defined as those presenting a context that challenges the success of students. This qualitative case study design explored successful Latino leadership in high-need Texas middle schools. Two Latino principals serving in high-need middle schools enhanced organizational and individual performance that fostered a culture of learning and equity for ELs as they supported teachers and created inclusive learning environments for students and families. Participants expressed having high expectations, a commitment to community, held deep roots in their communities, fostered a collaborative culture, and were aware of middle schoolers' needs. Limitations were also reported, and findings from the study offer valid information regarding potential practices for fostering an inclusive, equitable learning environment for middle school students.

Keywords: high-need schools, learning, leadership, context, English Learners, organizational performance, school culture, leading, equity

Introduction

Principals play a complex role in fostering school cultures where students and teachers feel safe. School safety is the foundation to equitable learning opportunities; however, principals in high-need schools face unique challenges regarding learning, leadership, and context (Medina et al., 2014). Historically, disparities in student outcomes in Texas public schools have been documented; however, the disparities continue to grow as the size of the Hispanic population increases across the U.S. (de Brey et al., 2019; Snyder et al., 2018). Furthermore, much of the literature in educational leadership focuses on the impact of school leadership on student performance, but there is a gap in research focusing on leaders, their leadership practices and school contexts (Hallinger, 2018). The purpose of this study was to explore the practices and behaviors of successful Latino principals in high-need Texas middle schools. High-need schools are defined by researchers from the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN) as schools situated in contexts of “poverty, wide economic, social, linguistic disparity, and high mobility” (Barnett & Stevenson, 2015, p. 518). Varying qualities of leadership essential for leading high-need middle schools coupled with contextual factors such as policy and community were examined. More importantly, the study investigated how Latino leaders promote a culture of learning in high-need middle schools with a focus on English learners.

Research Questions

This qualitative case study explored how Latino leaders enhance individual and organizational performance to foster a culture of learning and equity for ELs in high-need Texas middle schools. The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. How do Latino leaders enhance individual and organizational performance to create a culture of learning and equity for ELs in high-need middle schools?
2. How do internal and external school contexts impact individual learning and leadership in high-need middle schools?

Review of Literature

In Texas, approximately 60.6% of the student population is considered economically disadvantaged, and poverty in Texas continues to grow (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2022a). An increased awareness of how poverty affects schools across the nation requires an examination of how principals lead high-need schools (Kearney et al., 2021). Several studies (Hernandez, 2005, 2008, 2010; Rodríguez et al., 2009) suggest Latino leaders embrace community in schools, strengthen the school-home relationship, and use bilingual skills when needed. In this context, Latino principals embrace cultural diversity, engage students, staff, and parents, and empower ELs by affirming their identities (Cummins, 2001; Nieto & Bode, 2012). This fosters a cohesive, inclusive culture that supports the language learner while highlighting the influence of the Latino leader through an intersectional lens (Bordas, 2015).

Principals in High-Need Schools

Leadership studies identify principals as key players in closing the achievement gap for students (Marzano et al., 2005) and according to López (2018), “School leaders must also be deeply committed to social justice, advocacy, community empowerment, and social transformation if they are to make a dent in improving the lives of Latinx youth and communities in this country” (p. 81). This form of leadership requires different approaches of school reform as federal and state accountability mandates continue creating challenges for equitable learning opportunities that value culture diversity and the promotion of ELs (Murakami, 2009; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2015; Theoharis, 2009).

Principals play an integral role in promoting and ensuring equity for ELs (Baker & Wright, 2017), and in high-need schools, this is even more challenging by having to meet unaddressed academic, socio-emotional, and physical needs before focusing on student achievement (Medina et al., 2014). Moreover, ELs need school leaders who can empathize with them but also maintain high expectations for them at the same time (Murakami et al., 2018). This initiative requires school leaders who are mindful of the needs of ELs as they advocate and promote an inclusive school culture due to their familiarity with students’ cultural and family values (Murakami, 2009). In addition, professional identity plays a significant role in leadership (Murakami et al., 2018), as principals’ cultures, beliefs, identities, and values guide behavior (Welborn et al., 2022). As the demographics across U.S. schools continue to change, we need culturally responsive leaders who focus and build on the unique experiences that cultural and linguistic students bring to learning spaces.

Middle School and English Learners

In 2014, there were 4.8 million ELs in public schools, and Spanish was the native language of 3.7 million ELs (Snyder et al., 2018). Of the 5.4 million students in Texas public schools, 60.6% are identified as economically disadvantaged (ECD), and 21.7% are ELs (TEA, 2022a); however, only 37% of ECD and 35% of ELs met standards across all grades and subjects on the 2022 STAAR (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2022b). Despite educational reform and mandates, school leaders across the nation struggle to provide ELs with equitable learning opportunities (Hernandez & Murakami, 2016; Noguera, 2017).

Middle Schools in High-need Contexts

Bishop and Harrison’s middle school concept (2021) provides a framework describing the attributes and characteristics of successful middle schools that are “responsive to the nature, needs, and identities of young adolescents” (p.5). In addition, Rheaume (2022) suggests middle school leaders take a responsive approach to meet the needs of the “cultural, linguistic, sexual orientation, and other needs of the young adolescents in their care” (p. 14). The middle school transition serves as an important academic and social crossroads for students and, according to middle school researcher Balfanz (2009), often serves as the last opportunity for school engagement before high school. This transition is especially important for ELs who have

traditionally been marginalized, underserved, and heavily populated in high-need schools (Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2010). Students at the secondary level and beginning in middle school go through adolescent changes that bring an additional array of challenges for parents, teachers, and school leaders (Wentzel, 1997).

This transition is particularly dangerous at the middle school level where there seems to be a lack of fit between early adolescents' developmental needs and the demographic changes in their ethnic group representation from elementary and the new middle school environment (Morales-Chicas & Graham, 2016). The middle school years are especially important for ELs as they enter the general education classroom at the middle school level with decreased language support (Artiles & Dyson, 2005) and limited resources. This is especially true for Latino students largely populated in challenging high-need schools (Hernandez & Murakami, 2016; Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2010).

As we focus on the practices and behaviors of successful Latino principals, we quickly learn there is a disproportionate representation of Latino school leaders. Moreover, across the United States, only 5.2% of teachers and 6.8% of principals are Latino (Snyder et al., 2018). While the percentage of Latino principals in Texas is higher, there is still an underrepresentation when compared to the growing number of Latino students. Moreover, scholars who focus on Latino leadership found that Latino principals are more likely to work in high-need schools (Byrne-Jimenez & Méndez-Morse, 2016; Hernandez & Murakami, 2016). As such, it is vital we highlight the contributions of successful Latino principals in high-need schools as their professional experiences, cultural backgrounds, and identities enhance their leadership practices (Méndez-Morse et al., 2015).

Conceptual Framework

The cross-national conceptual framework (Murakami & Torres-Arcadia, 2019) was used for the study due to its language and culture-specific concepts. Other concepts include tenets identified in Murakami and Torres-Arcadia's (2019) cross-national research that was specifically designed for the study of Latino leaders in high-need schools. The tenets of the cross-national framework served as the structure to cross-compare themes and patterns of the cases in a logical, meaningful way.

- *Raíces y Familia* are associated with the deep roots of the community and the value of family in high-need schools (Murakami & Torres-Arcadia, p. 154).
- *Leadership/ Gestión* refers to Latino leaders' ability to advocate for students through a shared collaboration and familiarity with the socio-cultural and political dynamics of community representation (Murakami & Torres-Arcadia, p. 159).
- *Latinidad y Comunidad* is a form of social capital as Latinos work together to meet the needs within the community (Murakami & Torres-Arcadia, 2019).
- *Valorando el aprendizaje* refers to creating a culture of learning and high expectations.
- *History and Ontologies* are acknowledged by school leader and the culture and history of Mexicans is celebrated (Murakami & Torres-Arcadia, p. 156).

Finally, by adding the middle school concept to the cross-national framework, the researcher identified leadership tenets specifically sensitive to the learning needs of ELs in middle school contexts.

Research Methodology and Design

This study utilized a qualitative research design to explore and gain a deeper understanding of how Latino principals lead successful high-need schools (Creswell, 2013). The Relevant Situation for Different Research Strategies tool (Yin, 2018, p.6) was used to help identify a case study approach as it allowed participants to share their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013) through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were used to “seek opinions, perceptions, and evidence of day-to-day practice from active participants in the field” (Briggs et al., 2012, p.9). According to Roberts (2010), interviews provide greater depth to the phenomenon studied. While Briggs et al. (2012) suggest interviews give voice to those who have been marginalized. In addition, Salmons (2017) categories of online data were incorporated to identify and collect extant data. Extant data included collecting different forms of online communication such as images, posted texts, blogs, social networking sites, and other forms of communication applications. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), the “internet is a social phenomenon growing” (p. 197) as a field site in qualitative research. Online data collection played a significant role as it added to the thick description of the case studies.

Population and Sample

A purposeful sampling procedure was used to select the study’s sample (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell, 2013). Participants had to meet certain criteria. The participant had to be a principal at a public Texas middle school and serve in that position at the identified school for two or more years. Ten percent of the campus population must be ELs. The middle school campus earned all distinctions from the Texas Education Agency distinction for closing performance gaps for the 2017-2018 school year (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2018). The middle school was a high-need school. High-need schools are defined by researchers from the International School Leadership Development Network Data (ISLDN) as schools situated in contexts of “poverty, wide economic, social, linguistic disparity, and high mobility” (Barnett & Stevenson, 2015, p.158). Data was gathered using Texas Education Agency Distinction by Campus Type (TEA, 2018) to initially identify middle school campuses that met the criteria.

Sample Selection

Four hundred and forty-eight schools (n=448) from the 2018 TEA Districts and Campuses Receiving All Available Distinctions report were exported onto an Excel spreadsheet and then reduced to middle schools that met criteria (n = 43). Of these campuses, only 18 (n=18) campuses were considered high-need campuses due to a high population of Latino students, a high population of economically disadvantaged students, and 10% or more EL population. Of the 18 campuses, only eight (n=8) of the principals were Latino and had been at the selected campus for a minimum of two years. Potential research participants were invited by email or phone. Two principals agreed to participate (n=2).

Data and field notes from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed and coded (Creswell, 2007; Saldaña, 2016). Collected artifacts, such as images and pictures that were akin to the study or served as specific symbols, were used to identify themes. Following Saldaña's (2016) procedural guidelines for conducting the research, protocol coding was used as a priori codes were pre-established for the research of high-need schools.

The Cases

This study reports on the instrumental case studies of two high-need middle schools, one urban and one rural, and the principals involved in enhancing individual and organizational performance to foster a culture of learning for Latino ELs. Participants included two principals and two teachers. Selected principals for this study were in their current positions between four and five years. Principals were asked to nominate an exemplary teacher who contributed to the success of ELs at their campus. Each principal nominated one teacher. Semi-structured interviews took place between October 2019 and February 2020 (Zamora Robles, 2020). The participants for this study included two principals and two teachers: Principal Camila Caballero, and Principal Theresa Torres. Teachers were nominated by their principals: Maestra Isabela Ramirez and Maestra Mariela Martinez.

Case One: Dolores Huerta Middle School

Dolores Huerta Middle School is a high-need middle school nestled in a large urban city in North Texas. It was built in 1947 and served upper-middle-class White families (Dallas Magazine, 1982). According to the same article in the Dallas Magazine, in 1961 it was one of eight schools in the district that was ordered to accept Black students and upon doing so, attendance dropped as White families began moving to the suburbs or sending their children to private schools.

The school serves approximately 421 students, a large population of students who live below the poverty level (86%), are ELs (28%) and have a high concentration of Latino students (83%). At Dolores Huerta Middle School, special focus is placed on student interest and ability toward career exploration. In addition, students have opportunities to take Pre-AP courses for high school credit. Many of the students who attend Dolores Huerta Middle School are Latinos and ELs. The school website provides information in both English and Spanish. Meetings and events at school are also available in both languages. All documents and correspondence are translated to help parents navigate the school system.

The campus had a warm feel to it, and the walls were covered with student work. The building was clean and inviting. There were different culture themes decorated throughout the school while the library beautifully displayed books and art by various leaders such as activist Cesar Chavez and poet Kwame Alexander. Students had leadership roles, and there was a sense of pride throughout the school. Student ambassadors served as members of campus committees to give input on behalf of the student body. Their main role was to serve as representatives on behalf of the students at Dolores Huerta. Principal Caballero was proud of her student

ambassadors. In addition, the school has been recognized for many awards by different national and state organizations.

Case Two: Cesar Chavez Middle School

Cesar Chavez Middle School is located in a small rural border town in south Texas. The first school opened in 1915 and consolidated in 1970 (Garza, 2015). The consolidated school district serves approximately 10,000 students. Cesar Chavez Middle School served close to 800 students and was identified as a high-need middle school due to a large population of Latino students (98%), a high percentage of students living below the poverty line (n=85%), and high number of ELs (18%).

According to Garza (2015), after the Mexican War four tiny communities merged to form the small town of Yuma, known for its farming community through the 1960s. Additionally, Garza (2015) noted that the town opened its first school in 1904, and a nearby school district consolidated with Yuma ISD in 1970; two years later, a second district also consolidated with Yuma ISD. Additionally, the campus was recognized for its high academic performance by meeting TEA's requirements for receiving all available distinctions. Furthermore, in the late 1980s, the Immigration and Naturalization Service Processing Center was established right outside the city (Garza, 2015).

Theresa was born and raised in Yuma, Texas. She loved her town and the people who lived there. Her journey to the principalship began as an adult probation officer where she realized the adults she served lacked intervention at a much younger age. The desire to serve her community went back to her childhood years. Theresa's father served on the school board before she was born, and she recalled both parents serving as city commissioners. Eventually, her mother served as mayor of their town. Her parents loved and served the people of Yuma. This inspired Theresa to give back and serve the same community.

Results

Different themes emerged from the principal interviews, teacher interviews, public documents, and contexts of the campus location. A priori coding was used as transcripts were read through a framework for Latino leaders, based on the tenets of the cross-national framework by Murakami and Torres-Arcadia (2019). This study confirmed the following tenets as key features and practices: leadership/gestión, a culture of learning, leading, and high expectations, and a collaborative culture. However, during the cross-case analysis, a new tenet emerged with the focus on middle school: awareness of middle schoolers' needs. In addition, the themes corresponded to the study's overarching questions.

The following themes and subthemes were identified as important leadership practices and features of successful Latino principals in Texas middle schools. In addition, they address the research questions, how do Latino leaders enhance individual and organizational performance to create a culture of learning and equity for ELs and how do internal and external school contexts impact individual learning and leadership in high-need middle schools?

Themes of successful Latino middle school principals in Texas middle schools

1. Leadership/Gestión
 - a. Grassroots Leadership
 - b. Commitment to Comunidad
2. Culture of Learning, Leading, and High Expectations
3. Collaborative Culture
 - a. Raíces y Familia
 - b. Culture of learning: valorando el aprendizaje
4. Awareness of Middle Schoolers' Needs

Theme 1: Leadership/Gestión

Grassroots leadership. When asked how the internal and external school contexts impact learning and leadership, three of the four participants were familiar with the internal and external contexts of their communities and campuses due to their roots and closeness with the community. Camila lived in her city from the age of seven, and Teresa was a native of her district. They were invested in building the capacity of the communities they served. In addition, all four participants used their knowledge of the history of their campuses and their personal experiences to help engage students and parents. Familiarity with context was noted at both community and campus levels. Both principals provided a detailed description of their communities and their campuses.

Latinidad y Comunidad

The principals at both middle schools enhanced individual and organizational performance that fostered a culture of learning and equity for ELs. The following theme emerged from their narratives and counterstories: *Latinidad y Comunidad* was a form of social capital used by both principals to meet the needs of the community. Their narratives revealed their commitment to enhancing individual and organizational performance to enhance learning for students, teachers, and parents.

All four participants were familiar with their community's history and were also able to describe the demographics. As school leaders, Camila was aware of the role of politics and policy for EL programming and support and Theresa knew how to use her community's political stance to strengthen campus culture. Both principals understood the important role of community focused leadership at both the societal and campus levels.

Commitment to Comunidad

Both principals acknowledged their placement at high-need campuses to improve student performance. According to Principal Camila, Dolores Huerta Middle School has a history of being a high-performing campus. She knew she had to do something different to challenge the status quo. Theresa felt like one of her strengths was curriculum and instruction, but during the first three years at Cesar Chavez, she focused on discipline and safety. She described the culture of the school as "not good" and believed one of her biggest contributions to the campus was

changing the culture. She believed teachers knew she truly cared about them. She talked about being intentional about making sure she noticed things like new haircuts or when a teacher's spouse or child is sick. She believes teachers need to be cared for due to the difficult work that comes with teaching at a high-need middle school.

Isabela and Mariela shared the challenges of working at high-need middle schools. Both teachers mentioned the high number of students living below the poverty line. They also mentioned teacher support from their principals as one of the contributing practices and identified it as the reason for teaching at their campuses. Both teachers contributed their love for teaching at their high-need campuses to their principals. They had respect for them and their ability to create a culture for learning and high expectations for students, staff, and parents. Both teachers respected their principals. They were leaders that enhanced individual performance by building teacher capacity. Organizational performance was enhanced by fostering a culture of high expectations through inclusion and collaboration. Teachers were treated like professionals and their efforts were acknowledged and celebrated.

Theme 2: Culture of Learning, Leading, and High Expectations

Both principals and their teachers held strong beliefs about the power of education because of the doors and opportunities it opened in their lives. Camila and Theresa valued teachers and their professional efforts to help students learn. It was evident in their leadership practices. If teachers were required to attend professional development, both principals made sure they were also in attendance. Both leaders were visible at district and staff professional development. As Mariela noted, Principal Theresa modeled expectations for staff and never asked teachers to do something she was not willing to do herself. Camila stated she was on a team with her teachers as she believed student success was dependent on teacher success.

Both Isabela and Mariela said their principals supported them by ensuring students followed the school code of conduct. Both campuses had high expectations for learning and behavior. One parent at Cesar Chavez gave the campus a five-star rating on Facebook and noted, *"Excelente escuela! La disciplina que se aplica es muy buena."* (Retrieved from Facebook™).

Both principals had high expectations for themselves, students, staff, and parents. Staff held each other accountable at both campuses and had systems in place for teams to meet and reflect on data and students. Decisions were made as a team and both principals knew each student individually. Additionally, teachers at both campuses had opportunities to lead and grow their capacity to enhance collective efficacy. Leadership at both campuses was not based on one individual. It was distributed among the entire staff at both campuses, as a team effort, or *gestión*.

Theme 3: Collaborative Culture

Both principals' passion for learning and their strong belief in education was not only something they practiced at school, but it also intersected with their personal lives as well. These beliefs impacted learning for all students as it was the foundation for high expectations and leading by

example. In Latino communities, families, value learning (*valorando el aprendizaje*) and Latino principals can use their deep roots in the community to reach families, like Principal Caballero did.

Principal Theresa's personal life also intersected with her professional identity, as she wanted staff to know who she was outside of school. She held a meet and greet at the beginning of every school year. This allowed staff the opportunity to get to know one another and introduce any new staff members. Theresa introduced her family so her staff could see they were alike in many ways. Like them, she was also a wife, mother, daughter, and friend. In this sense, the culture at both campuses was collaborative, where teachers and leaders learned about one another.

During Mariela's interview, she talked about Ms. Torres' faith. She stated Ms. Torres' faith was a huge part of leadership on campus and in the community. She respected Theresa. Mariela knew Theresa led Sunday school classes at church. She also knew her father died at a young age and yet Theresa still focused on school, graduated from college, and continued serving in different capacities.

Mariela and Isabela were committed to the mission and vision led by the principals at both campuses. They both stated Camila and Theresa supported teachers by modeling and setting expectations. They were visible in hallways and classrooms. They knew students by names and held meetings with parents when students were struggling with discipline issues. All four participants talked about knowing each student individually. It was apparent that decisions were made based on what was best for students at both campuses. Supporting teachers was a leading theme at both campuses. A collaborative culture was practiced at both campuses by students, staff, and parents where together they valued education.

Conclusion

The findings of this study are important to the field of public education as administrators and teachers work to create equitable learning opportunities for all students. The student population will continue growing more diverse, and educational reform mandates, school improvement initiatives, and principal programs must be centered around leadership for social justice. As such, it is important to highlight the leadership behaviors of successful Latino leaders and their contributions to closing the performance gap in high-need schools. According to Theoharis (2007), social justice for ELs cannot take place without inclusive services, and researchers like Field et al. (2007) state equity as two things: fairness and inclusion. For ELs, equity is acquired through leadership for social justice. As noted by middle school experts Balfanz et al. (2007), preventing school disengagement is critical. Responsive middle school principals combat this problem by developing relationships with students, teachers, and the community at large (Gale & Bishop, 2014).

Leadership studies identify principals as key players in closing the achievement gap for students (Marzano et al., 2005), and according to López (2018), "School leaders must also be deeply committed to social justice, advocacy, community empowerment, and social transformation if

they are to make a dent in improving the lives of Latinx youth and communities in this country” (p. 81). Camila and Theresa were both deeply committed to social justice, advocacy, community empowerment, and social transformation, and through their leadership, they created a culture of learning and equity for ELs.

Awareness of Middle Schoolers’ Needs

Awareness of middle schoolers’ needs is a concept that needs to be researched further in high-need middle schools. Like the Latino principals in Murakami and Torres-Arcadia’s (2019) research, the cross-national framework (Murakami & Torres-Arcadia, 2019) highlighted Latino principals in two high-need middle schools’ ability to enhance organizational performance by fostering teacher collaboration. Nonetheless, the concepts were too broad for a focus on middle schoolers in high-need schools. In working with middle schoolers, all four participants in this study recognized the challenges that come with the middle school transition. Both campuses included information for parents on their websites that were designed specifically for middle school students, and all four participants talked about the challenges that come with working at middle school. More importantly, they were all aware of the importance of making sure each child was on the right track before they went to high school.

Celebrating the Middle Years

Both campuses held campus-wide celebrations for students. They celebrated student performance, but they also celebrated different cultures. Both campuses’ social media pages included photos of the different festivities and family nights. In addition, both schools created soccer teams through clubs for middle schoolers. In many Latino communities, soccer is a symbol of pride (Messerli, 2008). At Dolores Huerta, Isabela was the girls’ soccer coach. They did not have an official school soccer team, but at the time of the interview, they were in the process of creating a soccer club. Isabela was excited about her new leadership endeavor. The photos at school-wide events included principals and teachers supporting students, parents, and staff outside the campus at student-centered events.

At the middle school level, relationships and school belonging are important for students. The relationships developed with teachers, peers, and principals play an important role in setting the stage for high school and post-secondary readiness. These case studies confirmed tenets from the cross-national framework that are critical to the social and emotional development as well as academic performance of Latino middle schoolers. More importantly, we learned how Latina principals enhance individual and organizational performance to foster a culture of learning and equity for Latino ELs in high-need schools.

All four participants were keenly aware of middle schoolers’ socio-emotional needs, and they perceived their roles as advocates and models for student success (Byrne-Jimenez & Méndez-Morse, 2016; Gale & Bishop, 2014). Furthermore, according to Gándara and Contreras (2009), support systems such as access to intervention programs, community-based programs, and emotional support are important concepts that must be in place for Latino ELs as they transition to challenging middle school years. According to a study by Gale and Bishop (2014),

they found three distinct challenges based on other studies that are applicable to middle school principals:

1. Awareness of the unique nature and needs of middle schoolers,
2. The variety of building configurations, and
3. An increasing awareness of the critical role the middle school years play in success later in life.

In this same study, Gale and Bishop (2014) found successful middle school principals placed a big emphasis on relationships. This includes relationships with staff, students, and the community. They also stated the teachers and staff in the building must be aware of the physical and emotional development phases of middle schoolers and not place an emphasis solely on academics. All middle schoolers go through rapid changes during this developmental stage in their lives. Principals who lead at the middle level require a unique set of skills, including energy and enthusiasm, to support students during a critical time in their educational journey (Gale & Bishop, 2014).

Implications for Practice

As the student population continues to grow more diverse, educational researchers identify case studies as a critical approach to looking for conditions and capacities that contribute to the explanation of the phenomenon (Schwandt & Gates, 2018). Okilwa and Barnett (2018) suggest implications for research on leadership and context include purposely sampling districts where a certain population of students is growing in schools at different levels (e.g., middle, secondary, K-12). Other implications include improving school leadership in vulnerable contexts such as high-need schools as this universal concern continues to grow (Barnett & Stevenson, 2015; Gurr et al., 2014; Medina et al., 2014; Murakami & Kearney, 2016).

Research on successful Latino principals in high-need middle school contexts is critical as we seek to understand the impact of leadership in challenging contexts (Lee & Hallinger, 2012). As noted by Ms. Caballero, "You can't do this alone." Principals in high-need contexts cannot take on the work of school improvement alone. Both Latino leaders in this study enhanced individual performance by empowering teachers. Theresa noted, "I want them (teachers) to know that I really care about them." Their unique contribution to this study was their support of the principal-teacher relationship. According to Gale and Bishop (2014), relationships at the middle school level are the foundation of student engagement as students observe healthy relationships modeled by the adults on the campus. They also found responsive principals and teachers at the middle school level were informed and able to empathize with the vulnerable middle school stage (Gale & Bishop, 2014).

Teachers at both campuses attended professional development that was relevant to the needs of their students. This included physical movement at Cesar Chavez and student ambassadors at Dolores Huerta. This was possible because Ms. Caballero and Ms. Torres knew each teacher and each student. This was possible due to the number of middle schoolers, staffing, and the systems they had in place that distributed leadership and responsibility. They identified the

needs of the organization and aligned professional learning opportunities for teachers. Teachers applied their leadership skills as they presented what they learned at staff meetings. Camila and Theresa enhanced learning at their campuses by distributing leadership amongst teachers and supporting the principal-teacher relationship. These traits align with research by Bordas (2007), who found Latino leadership as collective and people-centered. It is recommended that middle school principals foster collaborative cultures by respecting and valuing teachers as professionals, encouraging them to take on leadership roles, and creating time for collaboration and input. Especially for teachers of middle schoolers, relationships with their principals, relationships with colleagues, and relationships with students are the foundation of success and equity (Gale & Bishop, 2014). Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) suggest that relationships between principals and teachers are critical components of sustaining a collaborative learning environment where all members contribute to student success. Additionally, Price and Moolenaar (2015) found social interactions between principals and teachers contribute to the learning cultures in schools. Given the important role of teacher-student relationships in school engagement for Latino middle school students (Brewster & Bowen, 2004), it is imperative for principals and teachers to work together to foster a culture of learning and equity.

REFERENCES

- Artiles, A. J., & Dyson, A. (2005). Inclusive education in the globalization age. In Mitchell, D. (Ed.), *Contextualizing inclusive education*, (pp. 37-62). Routledge.
- Baker, C., & Wright, W. E. (2017). *Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism* (6th ed). Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/baker9899>
- Balfanz, R. (2009). *Putting middle grades students on the graduation path: A policy and practice brief*. Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University. <https://lincolnteammates.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Importance-of-Middle-Grades.pdf>
- Balfanz, R., Herzog, L., & Mac Iver, D. J. (2007). Preventing student disengagement and keeping students on the graduation path in urban middle-grades schools: Early identification and effective interventions. *Educational Psychologist*, 42(4), 223-235. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520701621079>
- Barnett, B., & Stevenson, H. (2015). International perspectives in urban educational leadership: Social justice leadership and high-need schools. In M. A. Khalifa, C. Grant-Overton, & N. W. Arnold (Eds.), *Handbook of Urban School Leadership* (pp. 518-531). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bishop, P. A., & Harrison, L. M. (2021). *The successful middle school: This we believe*. Association for Middle Level Education.
- Bloomberg, L. D., & Volpe, M. F. (2019). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A roadmap from beginning to end* (4th ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Bordas, J. (2007). How salsa, soul, and spirit strengthen leadership. *Leader to leader*, 2007(46) 35-41. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ltl.255>
- Bordas, J. (2015). Leadership by the many the power of Latino inclusion. *Leader to Leader*, 2015(75), 56-63. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ltl.20167>
- Brewster, A. B., & Bowen, G. L. (2004). Teacher support and school engagement for Latino middle and high school students at risk of school failure. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 21(1), 47–67. doi:10.1023/B:CASW.0000012348.83939.6B
- Briggs, A., R.J., Coleman, M., & Morrison, M. (2012). *Research methods in educational leadership & management* (3rd ed.). London: Sage.
- Byrne-Jimenez, M., & Méndez-Morse, S. (2016). Portrait of a Latina/o leader in *Brown-eyed leaders of the sun: A portrait of Latina/o educational leaders*. Charlotte, NC. Information Age Publishing. (pp. 51-58).
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.) Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

- Cummins, J. (2001). *Negotiating Identities: Education for empowerment in a diverse society*. (2nd ed.) Los Angeles, CA: California Association for Bilingual Education.
- Dallas Magazine (1982). *Saving Longfellow school: A story of parents who cared*. Dallas Magazine. <https://www.dmagazine.com/publications/d-magazine/1982/may/saving-longfellow-school/>
- de Brey, C., Musu, L., McFarland, J., Wilkinson-Flicker, S., Diliberti, M., Zhang, A., & Wang, X. (2019). *Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic groups 2018* (NCES 2019-038). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/>.
- Field, S., Kuczera, M., & Pont, B. (2007). *No more failures: Ten steps to equity in education*, Education and Training Policy. OECD Publishing
- Gale, J. J., & Bishop, P. A. (2014). The work of effective middle grades principals: Responsiveness and relationship. *RMLE Online*, 37(9), pp. 1-23.
- Gándara, P., & Contreras, F. (2009). *The Latino education crisis: The consequences of failed social policies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Garza, A. A. (2015). *Handbook of Texas Online: Los Fresnos, Texas*. <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/los-fresnos-tx>
- Gurr, D., Drysdale, L., Clarke, S., & Wildy, H. (2014). High need schools in Australia: The leadership of two principals. *Management in Education*, 28(3), 86-90.
- Hallinger, P. (2018). Bringing context out of the shadows of leadership. *Management in Education*, 46(1), 5-24. doi:10.1177/1741143216670652
- Hernandez, F. (2005). *The racial identity development of selected Latino school principals and its relation to their leadership practice*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Wisconsin, Madison.
- Hernandez, F. (2008, November). *Latina/o assistant principals: Early findings from a national study*. Paper presented at the University Council for Educational Administration Conference, Orlando, FL
- Hernandez, F. (2010). Critical components of preparing professionals for social justice across three disciplines: Implications for school leadership programs. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 5(3), 43-47.
- Hernandez, F., & Murakami, E. (2016). *Brown-eyed leaders of the sun: A portrait of Latina/o educational leaders*. Charlotte, NC. Information Age Publishing.
- Kearney, W. S., Murakami, E., & Entzi, T. (2021). District and university partnerships in support of a high needs urban elementary school. *Education and Urban Society*, 53(6), 659-681. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124520974333>
- Lee, M. S., & Hallinger, P. (2012). Exploring the impact of national context on principals' time use: Economic development, societal culture, and educational system. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 23(4): 461–482.

- López, G. R. (2018). Foreword in Rodríguez, C., Martínez, M. A., & Valle, F. (Eds.). (2018). *Latino educational leadership: Serving Latino communities and preparing Latinx leaders across the P-20 pipeline*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing Inc.
- Marzano, R. J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. A. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. ASCD.
- Medina, V., Martínez, G., Murakami, E. T., Rodríguez, M., & Hernández, F. (2014). Principals' perceptions from within: Leadership in high-need schools in the USA. *Management in Education, 28*(3), 91-96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0892020614537664>
- Méndez-Morse, S., Murakami, E. T., Byrne-Jiménez, M., & Hernández, F. (2015). Mujeres in the principal's office: Latina school leaders. *Journal of Latinos and Education, 14*(3), 171–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2014.973566>
- Messeri, I. S. (2008). Vamos, vamos aceirteros: Soccer and the Latino community in Richmond, California. *Soccer & Society, 9*(3), 416-427.
- Morales-Chicas, J., & Graham, S. (2016). Latinos' changing ethnic group representation from elementary to middle school: Perceived belonging and academic achievement. *Journal of research on adolescence: The official journal of the Society for Research on Adolescence, 27*(3), 537–549. doi:10.1111/jora.12292MSMI
- Murakami, E. (2009). Educational leaders' challenges in creating equitable opportunities for English language learners. *International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning, 13*(3).
- Murakami, E., Hernández, F., Valle, F., & Almager, I. (2018). Latina/o school administrators and the intersectionality of professional identity and race. *SAGE Open, 8*(2).
- Murakami, E., & Kearney, W. S. (2016). Developing successful and effective school leadership in North America: The sustainable preparation of principals. In P. Pashiardis, & O. Johansson (Eds.), *Successful school leadership: International perspectives* (Chapter 5, p. 53-66). London, UK: Bloomsbury.
- Murakami-Ramalho, E., Garza, E., & Merchant, B. (2010). Successful school leadership in socioeconomically challenging contexts: School principals creating and sustaining successful school improvement. *International Studies in Educational Administration Journal of the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration & Management, 38*(3).
- Murakami, E., & Torres-Arcadia, C. C. (2019). A cross-national framework for the study of Latina/o school leaders in Mexico and Texas in: *Beyond marginality: Understanding the intersection of race, ethnicity, gender and difference in educational leadership research*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Nieto, S., & Bode, P. (2012). *Affirming diversity: The social political context of multicultural education*. 6th Ed. Boston, MA: Pearson. ISBN 0-13-268234-6
- Noguera, P. (2017). *Taking deeper learning to scale*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

- Okilwa, N., & Barnett, B. S. (2018). Four successive school leaders' response to a high needs urban elementary school context. *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 46, 45-85.
- Price, H. E., & Moolenaar, N. M. (2015). Principal-teacher relationships: foregrounding the international importance of principals' social relationships for school learning climates. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 53(1). <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-11-2014-0134>
- Rheaume, J. G. (2022). The middle school concept implementation gap: A leadership lens. *Middle Grades review*, 8(1).
<https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/mgreview/vol8/iss1/3>
- Roberts, C. M. (2010). *The dissertation journey: A practical and comprehensive guide to planning, writing, and defending your dissertation* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Rodríguez, M. A., Murakami-Ramalho, E., & Ruff, W. G. (2009). Leading with heart: Urban elementary principals as advocates for students. *Educational Considerations*, 36(2). <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1164>
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Salmons, J. (2017). *Doing qualitative research online*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Santamaria, L. J., & Santamaria, L. P. (2015). Counteracting educational injustice with applied critical leadership: Culturally responsive practices promoting sustainable change. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 17(1), 22-41.
- Schwandt, T. A., & Gates, E. F. (2018). Case study methodology. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*, 341-358.
- Snyder, T. D., de Brey, C., & Dillow, S. A. (2018). Digest of Education Statistics 2016. *National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences*, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC.
- Texas Education Agency. (2018). *Performance reporting division. Final 2018 accountability ratings*. <https://tea.texas.gov/texas-schools/accountability/academic-accountability/performance-reporting/listdistinctionall.pdf>
- Texas Education Agency. (2022a). *Enrollment in Texas public schools, 2021-22*. Division of research and analysis. Office of operations. <https://tea.texas.gov/reports-and-data/school-performance/accountability-research/enroll-2021-22.pdf>
- Texas Education Agency. (2022b). *2021-2022 STAAR Performance (TAPR)*. https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/cgi/sas/broker?_service=marykay&_program=perfreport.perfmast.sas&_debug=0&ccyy=2022&lev=S&prgopt=reports%2Ftapr%2Fpaper_tapr.sas
- Theoharis, G. (2007). Social justice educational leaders and resistance: Toward a theory of social justice leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 43(2), 221-258. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X06293717>

- Theoharis, G. (2009). *The school leaders our children deserve: Seven keys to equity, social justice, and school reform*. New York, NY: Teachers College.
- Tschannen-Moran, M., & Gareis, C. R. (2015). Faculty trust in the principal: an essential ingredient in high-performing schools. *Journal of Educational Administration* 53(1), 66-92. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-02-2014-0024>
- Welborn, J., Casey, T., Myatt, K., & Lindsey, R. B. (2022). *Leading change through the lens of cultural proficiency: An equitable approach to race and social class in our schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Wentzel, K. R. (1997). Student motivation in middle school: The role of perceived pedagogical caring. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 89(3), 411.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Zamora Robles, S. (2020). *Equity for English learners: Latin@ leadership in high-need middle schools* [Doctoral dissertation, University of North Texas]. UNT Digital Library. <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1703351/>