

EXTRAORDINARY WOMEN IN TEXAS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY  
OF MEXICAN AMERICAN FEMALE SUPERINTENDENTS

by

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to all the Latinas in educational administration who strive to make a difference in children's lives. To those of you who have been able to obtain the superintendency, your example of perseverance, commitment, and determination will provide opportunities to other aspiring Latina superintendents.

Most importantly, I want to dedicate this dissertation to my family. To my husband, Bryan, who understood the sacrifices that were necessary to complete my studies and supported me throughout this long journey. To my daughter, Chantelle, who has been my inspiration. Thank you both for your love, encouragement, and belief in my success.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
LIST OF TABLES .....	xi
ABSTRACT .....	xii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Rationale for the Study.....	6
Research on Female Superintendents.....	8
Research on Mexican American Female Superintendents.....	10
Research Questions .....	13
Purpose of the Study .....	13
Definition of Terms .....	14
Theoretical Framework .....	15
Limitations to the Study .....	18
Methodology .....	19
II. LITERATURE .....	22
Review of Literature.....	22
History of Women and the Superintendency .....	23
Women’s Movement.....	24
Historical Patterns .....	26
Female Superintendents .....	27
Stereotypes .....	28
Selection Process.....	29
Female Superintendents of Color .....	32
African American Female Superintendents .....	34
Latina Superintendents .....	36
Latino culture.....	37
Selection of Latina superintendents .....	40
Ethnic biases .....	42

	Gender biases .....	44
	Differences in ethnicity identification .....	47
	Mexican American Female Superintendents.....	48
	Cultural expectations .....	49
	Redefining role expectations .....	53
	Conclusion .....	55
III.	RESEARCH METHODS.....	57
	Introduction.....	57
	Research Design .....	58
	Participants.....	61
	Data Collection and Analysis .....	64
	Data Collection.....	65
	Data Analysis .....	69
	Trustworthiness .....	73
	Summary .....	75
IV.	RESEARCH FINDINGS.....	77
	Introduction.....	77
	Context of the Study.....	80
	Location of Mexican American Superintendents .....	81
	School district demographics.....	83
	School district size.....	85
	Glossary.....	86
	Case Narratives.....	89
	Estrella Méndez-Adams .....	89
	Rita Chavez .....	96
	Catherine Garcia .....	107
	Isabel Salinas.....	112
	Irma Gonzalez .....	120
	Gabriella Evans .....	127
	Rachel Robertson .....	135
	Summary .....	145
V.	ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS.....	146
	Themes in Seeking and Operating the Superintendency .....	147
	Experiences While Seeking the Superintendency.....	147
	Superintendency as the goal .....	147

Overcoming barriers.....	148
Perseverance and determination .....	150
Interviewing for the superintendency.....	152
Obtaining the Superintendency.....	153
Just do it .....	153
Leap of faith.....	156
Motivation for Seeking the Superintendency.....	157
Improving Educational Opportunities .....	158
Strategies and Support While Seeking the Superintendency .....	160
Mentorship and/or sponsorship .....	161
Mentors .....	162
Sponsors: Women empowering women .....	164
Loss of mentorship .....	165
Social capital.....	166
Strategies and Support While Operating the Superintendency .....	169
Family.....	169
Social capital.....	170
Redefinition of self.....	172
Gaining control .....	173
Asserting themselves.....	173
Claiming the role .....	174
Superintendent school board relations .....	174
Overriding Themes in Personal Experiences.....	176
Racism .....	176
Educational oppression .....	177
Segregation .....	178
Cultural Congruency.....	180
Gender differences: Power: and “control” .....	180
Gender roles.....	181
Collectivism .....	182
Cultural match .....	183
Compatibility .....	184
District Appeal .....	186
Challenge .....	187
Change agent.....	187
Make a difference .....	188
Give back to my community.....	189
Gender and Ethnicity Biases .....	189
Gender Stereotyping .....	190
School Board Politics .....	192
Superintendent school board relationships .....	194

	Trust.....	195
	Internal conflict.....	196
	Motives.....	198
	Power: “control” .....	199
	Personal Attributes.....	200
	Self-efficacy and confidence .....	201
	Risk-taking traits.....	202
	Determination and self-perseverance .....	205
	Summary .....	206
VI.	DISSCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS .....	208
	Discussion of Themes .....	208
	School Districts .....	209
	Cultural Match .....	210
	Seeking and Optaining the Superintendency .....	212
	Self-efficacy and confidence .....	213
	Gender stereotyping .....	213
	Cultural gender expectations .....	214
	Cultural congruency .....	215
	Cultural influences .....	216
	Superintendents as organizational change agent .....	217
	Strategies and Support .....	217
	Getting the Job.....	218
	Social capital.....	219
	Motivation.....	221
	Risk-taking.....	221
	Summary .....	222
	Implications and Recommendations .....	222
	Recommendations for Practice .....	223
	Cultural suppression .....	224
	Representation of Mexican American females.....	226
	Perceptions of fit.....	228
	Just do it .....	229
	Role of mentorship and/or sponsorship.....	231
	Faculty role models .....	232
	Mentorship after the superintendency .....	233
	Avoiding burnout.....	234
	Recommendations for Research.....	235
	Gender and ethnic biases.....	235
	School district match.....	236

Limitations of Study.....	238
Concluding Thoughts .....	239
APPENDIX SECTION.....	241
REFERENCES .....	251

## LIST OF TABLES

<b>Table</b>		<b>Page</b>
1.	School District Demographics .....	84
2.	Community Type and School District Size of Superintendents .....	86
3.	Region and School Board Members .....	193

## **ABSTRACT**

Women remain underrepresented in the superintendency with even less Mexican American female representation. At the time of this study, there were 1, 144 superintendents in Texas, 911 were male, and 233 were female. Of the current 233 female superintendents only 14 were Mexican American. Research on female superintendents has focused on studying women as a group. These studies do not explain the underrepresentation of Mexican American women in the superintendency. Mexican American women as a group are not addressed in academia and go unnoticed. This qualitative study focused exclusively on Mexican American female superintendents and extended beyond casual analysis by seeking out their voices and their personal experiences. The study addressed the following questions: What have been the experiences of Mexican American women while seeking and operating within the superintendency? What factors motivate Mexican American women to seek the superintendent position? And, what strategies and supports are available to Mexican American females as they seek and retain a superintendent's position?

This in-depth phenomenological study explored the experiences of seven Mexican American female superintendents in Texas. Multiple methods of data collection were used, demographic surveys, face to face interviews and observations, field notes and reflective journaling by the researcher. The primary source of information for this study came from the personal narratives of the seven Mexican American female

superintendents. Each participant presented a portrait of their personal experiences and their stories will provide a deeper understanding of the individual experiences of Mexican American female superintendents.

There are distinct patterns in the location and types of school districts that Mexican American female superintendents are being selected to lead. The women demonstrated competence in leading what some may consider challenging school districts. Their success is attributed to their personal drive, motivation and commitment for improving educational opportunities for all children, regardless of social economic status and ethnicity.

The participants of the study shared a number of common characteristics and personal traits. They were Mexican American women serving as the district leader in a public school district with a predominately Hispanic student enrollment that had a history of instability. They demonstrated personal attributes of self-efficacy and confidence, determination and perseverance, and commitment and dedication. Each woman had over 20 years of experience in public education. They differed in the number of superintendencies they had held, the total years of practice as a superintendent, and the levels of education they had attained.

Their life history uncovered personal experiences associated with ethnicity and/or gender biases. These personal experiences occurred during their formative years and/or during their ascension to the superintendency as educational administrators at the campus and district level. The findings from this study corroborated the importance of

mentorship, sponsorship, networking, and social capital in gaining access to the superintendency. The additional support systems that these superintendents relied on while operating the superintendency included support from family and professional colleagues. These support mechanisms assisted them in coping with cultural incongruence and school board affairs. The strategies and skills that the participants depicted in this study will provide aspiring Mexican American female superintendents a foundation for preparing themselves for their search for the superintendent position.

# I. INTRODUCTION

## Statement of the Problem

The number of women in educational administration leadership positions does not correspond with the number of women in the educational work force. In Texas, 76.7% of all teaching positions are held by women (Ramsay, 2013). Males have traditionally dominated educational administrative positions. White males, often sponsored by the “good ole boy” network (Hord & Estes, 1993), constitute the vast majority of superintendents (Glass, 2000). In the United States, fewer than 20% of women hold the superintendent position (Duwe & Mendez-Morse, 2010). The number of female superintendents is substantially disproportionate to the number of women who are certified and qualified to for the superintendency (Grogan & Shakefield, 2011). According to Kowalski (2011), 75.9% of all superintendents are male, and 94% are White. Kowalski reported that the number of female superintendents and persons of color “have increased over the past decade” (p. 85). Within the last 20 years, there have been increases of women enrolled in doctoral programs in educational administration suggesting that women aspire to obtain superintendent positions (Grogan, 2006). According to the *American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial Study*, female superintendents have made inroads in a historically male dominated position by increasing their numbers to 24% (Kowalski, 2011). This is a small increase in comparison to the 18% that was reported by Grogan & Brunner (2005). Nationally, women of color nevertheless remain largely underrepresented as superintendents. Brunner and Peyton-Claire’s (2000) study revealed that female superintendents were 91.6% White, 5.1% Black, 1.3% Hispanic, 0.7% Native American, and 0.7% other. In

Hess's (2002) study (n=795), only 10% of all superintendents nationwide were women of color. Even though Kowalski's report states that the percentages of females and persons of color in the superintendency has increased over the past decade, "their presence in the position does not reflect the diversity of both the national population and the total student population in public schools" (p. 85). In addition, Kowalski reports that only 2% of all superintendents in the nation are Hispanic. This indicates that Hispanic women are greatly underrepresented. His most current report does not provide us with a breakdown of gender and ethnicity. Tallerico (1999) informs us that "specific counts by gender and race are non-existent since most data are reported by gender only, or race only" (p. 31). Grogan and Brunner (2005) reported that 8% of female superintendents were identified as women of color, and only 1% of those women were identified as Latina. Within this ethnic group, previous studies indicate that the number of Mexican American women in administration was smaller than any other ethnic groups (Ortiz, 1981). A more recent study suggests that the trend has not improved and that Mexican American women continue to be underrepresented in all educational administrative positions, especially in the superintendency (Reyes Rodriguez-Casas, 2004). There are a limited number of studies on the topic of female superintendents and this problem has not been given the necessary attention in national educational record (Grogan & Shakefield, 2011).

Currently, only 20% of all superintendents in Texas are female (Texas Education Agency School District Directory, 2011). The overall majority of superintendents are males and largely white (Ramsay, 2013). The demographic data of school leadership from the 4<sup>th</sup> largest school district in Texas, North Side Independent School District, is illustrative of this distribution. North Side Independent School District is an area that is

predominately comprised of a Hispanic population. Student enrollment at North Side Independent School District is 92,335 of these 94.4% are Hispanic, 23.4% are White, 8.0% are African American, and 4.2% are other. Culturally parallel and linguistically diverse children now represent the vast majority of school enrollments; however only 24.3% of the 329, 352 teachers in Texas are Hispanic (Ramsay, 2013). Currently, the top executive position at North Side ISD is held by a White male, nine out of nineteen Superintendent Cabinet members are women, only two are Hispanic. The under-representation of Hispanic females as school executives at North Side ISD is typical of Texas school districts.

The insufficient representation of Mexican American female superintendents is disturbing, especially since the demographics of Texas schools are rapidly changing. In 2009 -2010 according to the Texas Education Agency, the Texas student enrollment was 4,847,844. The breakdown of ethnicity was 48.6% Hispanic (2.4 million), 33.3% White (1.6 million), 14% African American (679,351), and 4.1% other (198,992). Former Texas State demographer, Dr. Steve Murdock, predicted that Texas schools will increase in enrollment by 1.1 million students from 2000 to 2040. By 2040, 66.3% of the students will be Hispanic, 19.9% White, and 8.3% African American (Texas State Data Center, 2008). The state's rapidly changing demographics will affect the cultural and societal influences in schools. Research indicates the importance of having administrators and teachers of color who can serve as role models for students of color (Jackson, 1999; Nicholson, 1999; Ortiz, 1999). It is unfortunate that Texas school districts lack the representation of Mexican American female superintendents who can serve as role models for all students and aspiring educational leaders.

Ortiz (1999) examined characteristics of school districts that appointed Hispanic female superintendents and reported that the districts had high percentages of Hispanic and low social economic students and had low performing schools. Ortiz reports “Hispanic women are more likely to be sought out when school districts are in trouble” (p. 97). Typically, schools that have high numbers of low income students tend to have huge needs. A 2010 Texas Education Agency report states that the current economic conditions have increased the percentage of low income families to 59%. This includes students that require diversified instruction in-order to meet language needs (Valenzuela, 2002).

According to Newton (2006) some scholars maintain that there is an “unwritten hierarchy of school districts” which influences desirability from prospective applicants for the superintendent positions. Measures of desirability include district wealth, geographic location, academic achievement status, district size, and student population. Female superintendents “tend to be disproportionately clustered in large, urban, troubled districts and small districts that are financially strapped” (Newton, p. 559). Ortiz and Marshall (1988) report that 1, 944 female superintendents were “overrepresented in the least desirable districts” (p. 559). In smaller districts, 300 or fewer students, females comprised 59.3% of the superintendent population. In suburban or urban districts, with 3,000 to 24,000 students, the percentage of female superintendents is 28%. In larger districts, where student enrollment exceeds 25,000 the percentage of female superintendents is only 3.1% (Kowalski, 2011). The percentages of female superintendents in smaller districts have increased substantially, however their percentages in larger districts have decreased considerably from 11% to 3.1%. These

figures indicate that the larger the district, the less likely that a female will obtain the superintendent position. Tallerico (1999) reports that increases in the number of superintendents of color has occurred in troubled urban districts. Bell (1998) concludes that women and persons of color occupy the superintendency in the lowest settings of the unwritten hierarchy of districts.

Overall, women have been unsuccessful in breaking the glass ceiling in the superintendency. Men are more likely to obtain positions in larger districts and women struggle to obtain the most desirable positions. Women remain underrepresented in the superintendency with even less Mexican American female representation. Couch (2007) found that “in states where Latinos are the majority minority, Latinas represented even a smaller percentage and were not proportionate to the White female majority” (p.viii). In Texas out of the current 233 female superintendents only 14 are Mexican American. In Grogan’s & Brunner’s (2005) study only 1% percent of the women surveyed identified themselves as Latina. Grogan & Brunner report that this is a surprising low number given the current population trends in the United States. Research on female superintendents has focused on studying women as a group. These studies do not explain the underrepresentation of Mexican American women in the superintendency. Mexican American women as a group are not addressed in academia and go unnoticed. The few studies that have focused exclusively on Mexican American female superintendents report that Mexican American women encounter barriers associated with both gender and race when seeking the superintendency (Couch, 2007; Mendez-Morse, 1997). Additional research on this specific group is needed in-order to understand the organizational,

societal, and cultural constraints which prevent Mexican American women from accessing the superintendency.

### **Rationale for the Study**

The Mexican American woman's ability to access the superintendency is not keeping pace with the increase of the Hispanic population. In 2010, 63% of Hispanics in the United States were from Mexican origin and as of July 2011, 50% of all Hispanics lived in California, Texas, and Florida, with Texas having the second highest Hispanic population of 9.5 million (United States Census Bureau, 2010). By 2020 the Hispanic population in Texas is expected to outnumber the White population (Texas State Data Center, 2008). The Texas State Data Center projects that the enrollment of Hispanics students in public elementary and secondary schools will increase to 66.3% by 2040, up from 39.5% in 2000. In the 2006-2007 school year Hispanics made up the largest percentage of grade 7 to 12 students, 42.8%, and accounted for the highest percentage of student drop outs in that school year, 57.5% (Texas Education Agency, 2008). According to the Texas Education Agency, between 1987-1989 and 2007-2008, Texas Public schools served an increasingly diverse population of students which includes serving a larger percentage of Limited English Proficient students. The number of students identified as Limited English Proficient grew by 49.1 % between 1997-98 and 2007-08, the number of students receiving bilingual and ESL services increased by 56.1%. Texas' changing demographics creates new demands on the state's educational needs. With the rising number of Latino students in school districts across the country school districts would "benefit from leaders who are representative of their community's population"

(Ortiz, 2001, p. 58). Mexican American female superintendents are a unique group, but nonetheless an important population that is needed in educational administration.

Considering that Mexican American women are greatly underrepresented in the superintendent position, it is critical to study Mexican American women who are currently in superintendent positions to pave the way for others. Historically, research on educational administration has often been written by men about men (Brunner, 2002; Tallerico, 1999) while research on women superintendents has not been extensive (Brunner, 2000; Grogan, 2000). The majority of research on women in educational leadership focuses primarily on White female administrators. There is a limited amount of research that focuses on women of color and significantly less on Mexican American female superintendents. Benham (1997) notes “there are fewer researchers of color who explore issues of differences among ethnic minority leaders.” Researchers examining school leaders have paid relatively little attention to the life experiences and careers of ethnic minority women (Benham, 1997). This study will fill the crucial need to examine the stories of Mexican American female superintendents.

This study will specifically focus on Mexican American women. This will provide data on an ethnic group in which a dearth of research exists. The term “Hispanic” is inclusive of all persons of Spanish-speaking descent and Latino/Latina is commonly used to identify persons of Latin American origins, such as Cuba, Puerto Rico, and South America. Neither term distinguishes among the heterogeneous Spanish-speaking populations of the world and the United States. These ethnic groups have different cultural and historical experiences in the United States. The disadvantage of this label is that it obscures the distinction between groups (Niemann, 2002). The term Mexican

American is used to identify Americans of Mexican descent and are sometimes included in an all-inclusive label as either Latino or Hispanic. This study focused on Mexican American women and provides an understanding and clear distinction among this group within the Hispanic/Latino classification.

### **Research on Female Superintendents**

Although, women continue to hold the majority of teaching positions in public education, they have not been able to break the glass ceiling by obtaining top administrator positions as quickly as their male colleagues. There have been significant increases of women participating in superintendent internships and surveys reveal that women are interested in the superintendency (Grogan, 1996). Obtaining the superintendent position for women has been difficult and is the “slowest of all K-12 administrative roles to integrate women and people of color” (Tallerico, 2000, p. 1). This phenomenon has drawn some attention by researchers to examine women in their quest for the superintendency.

Tallerico (2000) examined common selection practices of school districts, school boards, and consulting companies when seeking candidates for the superintendent position. Her conclusions are that systemic regularities exist in most school districts; some of the practices include institutionalized methods that result in behind scenes influences by consultants, veteran superintendents, and confidential reference checks. These practices often include “sociocultural biases and other unwritten rules” which “present unique challenges for women and others who are unlike White male superintendents” (p. 137). These unspoken practices, which include males sponsoring

males through established networks, create barriers for all women but place even greater constraints on women of color, who are not members of traditional networking groups.

Margaret Grogan (1996) focused on experiences of women who aspired to become superintendents. According to Grogan, “over the past 20 years, significant increases in women in doctoral programs in educational administration suggest that more women aspire to the superintendency” (p.21) There has been an increase in women obtaining educational leadership positions, as assistant principals, principals, and at the central office level. However, throughout the country the number of women who obtain the position of superintendent continues to remain low. Her research revealed significant insights about aspiring female superintendents and the barriers that they encounter when seeking the superintendent position. An important finding is that female administrators are seen as “women first and administrators second” (p. 8). This substantiates the premise that gender impacts how others perceive educational administration. Grogan concludes that current approaches to the superintendency are “firmly rooted in traditional male styles” (p. 181) and are also rooted in a White male perspective. Thus, women of color not only experience opposition based on their gender but also based on their race. Women in this study encountered several barriers as they sought the superintendency. Most of the women in the study did not have other female superintendents to provide mentorship and role modeling. Some of the women encountered personal conflicts with traditional gender roles. One participant stated “as an administrator I would sacrifice weekends and my family basically, I’d leave my children with their dad and work at a great personal expense” (p. 185). Other women had family obligations that limited their mobility and ability relocate to another area where superintendent positions were

available. Another major barrier was timing for some women. Even women who were at a point where these barriers no longer restricted them, found themselves in the latter stages of their careers, constituting yet one more deterrent to get into the pool of superintendent candidates. Grogan concluded that the women in her study were “strongly qualified for the position as their male counterparts” and some of the women believed that obtaining the superintendency would “disintegrate” their personal lives (p. 181).

### **Research on Mexican American Female Superintendents**

The literature or work that has been conducted on Mexican American female superintendents is scarce. The majority of the research that has been conducted on the Latina superintendent has been conducted by only two researchers: Flora Ida Ortiz and Sylvia Mendez-Morse (Gonzalez, 2007). Flora Ida Ortiz pioneered this topic in 1991, with *A Hispanic Female Superintendent's Leadership and School District Culture*. Mendez-Morse soon followed, with her unpublished dissertation in 1997, *Redefinition of Self: Mexican – American Women Becoming Superintendents*. While these two women have continued to research the Latina superintendent, (Ortiz, 1999, 2000, 2001; Mendez-Morse, 1999, 2000, 2004) few other scholars have followed in their steps. The only other available literature is provided in dissertations by Maria Reyes Rodriguez-Casas (2002), Cristina Quilantan (2004), and Irene Gonzalez (2007).

Ortiz (1999) examined the process of seeking and selecting Hispanic female superintendents in the Southwestern United States. In her study, she concluded that Hispanic women encountered barriers when seeking the superintendency. Some of the women were more likely to consider the principalship as the ultimate position. Since advancement in educational administration requires sponsorship, many of the women did

not have the support which would assist them in advancing. The work experience of most females did not appeal to search committees. Most search committees seek candidates with experience in human resources and finance, and women are more likely to have the majority of their experience in curriculum and instruction. Hispanic women typically have experience in areas related to ethnicity, and according to Ortiz “the selection of the candidate is focused on matching the candidate with the district and the final decision tends to be personal rather than professional, the likelihood of a Hispanic female being preferred is remote” (p. 92). She concluded that Hispanic female superintendents were appointed in districts “where no one else is likely to want it” and in districts experiencing drastic changes, such as bankruptcy, high administrator turn-over, and dramatic demographic and economic changes (p. 99). Although, this study is relevant it is outdated and more current data is warranted.

Mendez-Morse (1997) examined the experiences of Mexican American woman as they attain the superintendent’s position. At the time of this study (1992-1993), there were only ten Mexican American female superintendents in both Texas and New Mexico. This study is unique because it narrowed the focus on Mexican American females. The research studied in depth the experiences of Mexican American women as they became superintendents and what these experiences meant to them. She reports “these women redefined themselves as they progressed through their administrative careers” this continued in their experience as a superintendent (p. 7). This redefinition of self was their private recognition that their relationships with others would change as they progressed through administrative positions. That they were “considered the position first, a person second, and that the superintendency was a lonely position” (p. 8). These women rejected

the standard that had been established for pursuing and obtaining the superintendent position. They asserted themselves as a competent district leader; they claimed the superintendency as part of their identity; they formed a new definition of themselves “being a minority women responsible for leading a district” (p. 9).

Quilantan (2002) examined similar subject matter. Quilantan provides important information regarding personal and professional characteristics of ten Mexican American female superintendents. At the time of this study a total of 1,778 individuals filled the superintendent position in Texas, 939 were White males, 159 were White females, 66 were Mexican American males, and only 10 were Mexican American females. These Mexican American women encountered several barriers in their quest for the superintendency. In fact, Quilantan found “Mexican American women face more challenges than White women because they are more isolated” (p. 22). This sense of isolation originates with the lack of mentorship from other Mexican American female superintendents. Quilantan reported that Mexican American female superintendents encounter additional barriers because the organizations of schools follow a “vertical and patriarchal model where the White man is at the top of the organizational structure and minority groups at the bottom” (p. 22). Her study concluded that Mexican American female superintendents encountered two major obstacles; sex-role stereotypes and the hierarchical structure of organizations. Additional challenges that are encountered by Mexican American females are ethnicity, school district profile, career mobility, isolation, and privacy. In-order to meet these challenges the aspiring Mexican American female superintendent will utilize personal strength of self-identity, coping skills, and social capital.

While Mendez-Morse and Quilantan have made in-roads in bringing research on the Mexican American female superintendent into the mainstream, more of this type of research needs to be done.

### **Research Questions**

To understand fully the experience of the Mexican American female school leader as she aspires to obtain the superintendent position, this study will explore the following questions;

1. What have been the experiences of Mexican American women while seeking and operating within the superintendency?
2. What factors motivate Mexican American women to seek the superintendent position?
3. What strategies and supports are available to Mexican American females as they seek and retain a superintendent's position?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore the personal experiences of Mexican American females who have been successful in obtaining and retaining the superintendent position. This study will provide an understanding of the Mexican American female as an educational leader and the role she carries in this position. The intent of the researcher is to provide guidance to Mexican American women aspiring to become superintendents. The study will also guide educational leadership programs by providing data on internal and external support systems for women who aspire to become superintendents. This study is also relevant to current issues in school administration, specifically for Texas schools, where numbers of Hispanic students have increased, but

the number of Mexican American female educators wishing to seek a leadership position such as the superintendency remains limited.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms are specifically defined for the purpose of this study.

Chicana– refers to women of Mexican descent born and/or raised in the United States. The term Chicana (and Chicano) came into popular usage during the Chicano movimiento of the 1960s and 70s as Mexican-American activists sought to define a cultural and political identity for themselves a United States citizen of Mexican American descent. This term is most commonly used in California. (“Who are Chicanos?”, 2013)

Educational Leader – refers to the campus principal or district superintendent whose roles are to identify the educational needs of student achievement and recommend activities and strategies for improving student learning.

Ethnicity – refers to a socially and culturally defined group that share common ancestors.

Hispanic – refers to people from countries that have Spanish as their official language, this term is most commonly used by the United States Census Bureau to identify persons of Mexican, South American, and Spanish descent. (Gonzalez & Gandara, 2005)

Latina/o – is used to refer to a person of Hispanic ancestry who lives in the United States. It is used synonymously with Hispanic. Gonzalez and Gandara

(2005) assert that “Latino is perceived as connoting racial differences, whereas Hispanic is seen as race neutral” (p. 394).

Mexican American – refers to American citizens who were born in the United States, are from Mexican descent and self- identify as a Mexican American. Their social-political factors and heritage differ from other Hispanic groups.

Resiliency - refers to the psychological term in which individuals possess the positive capacity to cope with stress and adversity and deal with change and continue to develop.

Superintendent – refers to the chief executive officer of a school district, this is the highest ranking position for the school district and their role includes leading and managing the district’s educational programs, district finances, human resources, and facilities.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in a feminist perspective which “recognizes that there are social inequalities which rest on gender differences” (Grogan, 1996, p. 21.) and “presumes the importance of gender in human relationships and societal processes” (Patton, 2002, p. 179). Grogan (1996) has set the stage for future feminist research by guiding others to see an end to social arrangements which lead women to be “other than, less than, put down, and put up” (p. 21). Feminist scholars argue that gender neutrality in organizations, including public schooling, does not exist (Aker, 1992). The central commitment of feminist research is the call for progressive social change (Sprague, 2005).

Qualitative feminist research has differentiated ideologies with varying and complex views (Olesen, 1994). Feminists are a heterogeneous group giving voice to marginalized groups (Acker, 1991; Bell, 1988; Garcia; 1989; Hurtado, 1989). Feminist scholars such as Sprague (2005) contend that gender “in interaction with many other areas like race/ethnicity, class, and ability is a key organizer of social life” and understanding how things work allows feminists to “take action to make the social world more equitable” (p. 3). In the 1960’s during the second wave of the women’s movement in the United States, women of color, third world feminist, disabled women, and lesbians challenged white feminist thought (Roth, 2004). They contended that the earlier feminist movement did not take care of the needs of all women. First-wave feminism was conceptualized as homogenous “white and primarily middle class” (Roth, 2004, p. 2). The second wave feminists contended that female experiences differed and women of color experienced complex oppressions, which were not “understood by white feminists” (Olesen, 1994, p. 160). Olesen emphasizes that feminism continues to have differentiating views and it is important to examine “problematic women’s diverse situations and the institutions and frames that influence those situations” in the “interest of realizing social justice for women” (p. 158). Feminist inquiry focuses on giving “voice to the voiceless” and reporting the experiences of women who have been absent from research (p. 169).

Patton (2002) explains that feminist inquiry challenges the misguided assumption “one can cleanse oneself” from fundamental understandings and conceptions that are shaped by gender and ethnicity. Feminist inquiry provides conceptual and analytical direction with a “methodological orientation in emphasizing participatory, collaborative,

change-oriented, and empowering forms of inquiry” (p. 130). Patton includes key principles of feminist inquiry: 1) equality between researcher and participant with a sense of connectedness, 2) acknowledging “women’s way of knowing”, which includes reason, intuition, emotion, and experience, and 3) engaging in knowledge about women for the purpose of change (p. 129).

The intersection of race and gender play a crucial role when it comes to women breaking the glass ceiling. Alston (2005) suggests that researchers consider race and gender as a “lens to investigate the intersectionality of lived experiences” (p.684). Grogan (1996) reports that gender and race are “powerful factors in the way women have been formed as individuals” (p. 90). Not only is gender an issue but race and ethnicity are some of the hidden biases in the selection of superintendents. Research reports women from certain ethnicity groups, such as Mexican American and African American experience additional barriers when seeking top educational administrative positions. Tallerico (2000, p. 91) quotes an African American female seeking the superintendency, “if there’s not a real lot of brown faces among the school children in a district, I might as well not even apply.” Women of color are aware of the disparities they will face because of the color of their skin.

Historically Mexican American’s have experienced discrimination in the United States. It may not have been as overt in the case of African Americans, but it has existed in Texas. Samora and Simon (1977) report that discrimination against Mexican Americans was not supported by legislation, as was the case for African Americans, before the civil rights movement. Samora and Simon report that Mexican Americans were considered Caucasians (white) and the discriminatory laws against blacks supported

by the legislature did not apply to Mexican Americans. They allege that “middle-class Anglos have generally considered themselves superior to everyone else” and this opened the door to subtle discrimination against Mexican Americans (p 167). The cultural influences of the Mexican American female are a key issue that needs to be examined throughout this study, thus Chicana feminism will also be applied to this study.

Chicana feminist ideologies developed in the late 1960’s from the pressures of gender stereotyping and constraints from Chicano men within the Chicana movement. Their discourse shifted from the critique of racial oppression to sexism or what they referred to as “machismo” (Garcia, 1997, p. 4). Chicana feminists questioned first wave feminism by maintaining “for women of color, race, class, and gender subordination are experienced simultaneously and that their oppression is not only by members of their own group but by whites of both genders” (Hurtado, 1989, p. 839). Chicana feminism contradicts the stereotype of the passive Mexican woman and expanded the “Chicano nationalism to include the role of assertive strong Chicanas” (Garcia, 1997, p. 18).

### **Limitations to the Study**

There were several limitations to the study. First the sample size of current Mexican American women was limited. A preemptory review of the public school district directory from the Texas Education Agency directory only yielded 14 female Mexican American superintendents at the time of this study. According to Duwe and Mendez-Morse (2010), greater numbers of women are seeking the credentials to become superintendents. However, the number of women who obtain the position is much smaller than the number of women who have received their credentials.

A second limitation was not generalizing the findings of this study to other women of color and to males and/or Hispanic males. While it may be tempting to compare the experiences of Mexican American women to other female leaders as well as comparing them to Mexican American men or other persons of color, that was not the intent of this inquiry.

One final limitation was that the study came from the lens an individual researcher with a Chicana feminist perspective. Thus, it was very important in conducting this phenomenological study to identify prejudices and biases from my own life history. In this way, I inform the reader of the filter I used to interpret the data. In addition, during the analysis of data, I remained cognizant of personal biases related to my own cultural influences and experiences as a Mexican American female.

### **Methodology**

The method of inquiry will be a qualitative approach that will involve an interpretive and naturalistic approach (Creswell, 1998). Marshall and Rossman (2006) describe qualitative inquiry as exploratory and descriptive research, searching for a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the participants of the phenomenon being studied. The research questions and theoretical framework of this study justifies phenomenological inquiry, which explores the experiences of different Mexican American females who have successfully obtained the superintendency. Phenomenology is grounded in the philosophical tradition first used and developed by Edmund Husserl (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton, 2002). Husserl referred to phenomenology as the study of how people experience and describe things through their senses (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) describes phenomenological research as “methodologically, carefully, and

thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon” (p. 104) and the focus of the researcher is to provide “descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience” (p. 107). Patton emphasizes the importance of in-depth interviews and participant observation for reporting the phenomenon. The process for collecting data for this study will involve in-depth interviews, participant observations, and review of documents. The function of in-depth interviewing is to present a comprehensive understanding and detailed description of the meaning of a “small number of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 1998, p. 122). This will produce a deeper understanding of the individual experiences of Mexican American female superintendents.

This qualitative approach to research provided a way to create understanding of the researcher. Clarifying researcher bias during the outset of this study is important, so the reader has an understanding of the researcher’s position (Creswell, 1998). In contrast to positivists, phenomenologists believe that the researcher cannot be detached from his/her own presuppositions nor should the researcher pretend otherwise (Hammersley, 2000). The researcher is a Mexican American female with 10 years of experience in educational leadership and holds a current superintendent certification. The underlying concept of this study was viewed through the lens of Chicana feminist thought. Chicana feminism contradicts the stereotype of the passive Mexican woman and expanded to include the role of assertive strong Chicanas (Garcia, 1997). Chicana feminist theory developed as a result of second wave feminism and recognized that Mexican American women have struggled with inequalities which differed from White women’s struggles (Gallardo, 1996). These ideologies contend that women of color experience gender

subordination concurrently with oppressions related to race and social class. (Hurtado, 1989). Sprague (2005) asserts that similarities in gender, race, class, and other facets of social status positively impacts the interactions of the researcher and participant and how they talk to each other. Goffney & Edmonson (2012) support feminist thought that claim “successful interviewing requires that there be a considerable shared culture between the interviewer and interviewee, not only should woman interview woman, but women in the same position (p. 5). Qualitative inquiry uses the researcher’s direct experiences and insights about those experiences (Patton, 2002). The researcher’s commitment was to provide a rich and descriptive interpretation of the experiences of Mexican American female superintendents.

## **II. LITERATURE**

### **Review of Literature**

Within the last 20 years, the topic of female superintendents emerged in an attempt to study the phenomena as to why so few women are represented in the superintendency. The researchers who have presented data on this topic are primarily women and their studies show that gender biases are prevalent which create a variety of barriers for women who seek and obtain the superintendency (Blount, 1999; Brunner, 1999; Grogan 1996; Skrla, 1999; Tallerico, 1999). The research on female superintendents is limited and research on women of color remains scant, in particular, Hispanic women (Ortiz, 1998). Literature that exclusively focuses on Mexican American female superintendents did not emerge until the late 1990's with Mendez-Morse's work. The review of literature indicates that not only do Mexican American female superintendents encounter barriers based on gender biases, they also "contend with ethnic stereotyping" (Mendez-Morse, 1997, p. 126) This population continues to be under-represented in the superintendency and has not made significant gains in obtaining the superintendent position. In 1992, during Mendez-Morse's study, only 8 Mexican American women were superintendents in Texas, currently 14 are listed in the Texas Education Agency School District Directory. The educational leadership experiences of these Mexican American female superintendents can provide this study with the data required to examine how these women were able to overcome barriers and constraints while seeking the superintendency.

In-order to understand this phenomenon fully, the review of literature included reviewing research which had focused on the superintendency, women in the

superintendency, the history of women in the superintendency, and women of color in the superintendency. This review of literature is divided into the following sections: the history of women in the superintendency, female superintendents, female superintendents of color, African American superintendents, Latina superintendents, and Mexican American female superintendents. The purpose of including separate sections for Latina superintendents and Mexican American female superintendents is to signify that differences exist within Hispanic groups and acknowledge the variations of ethnicity identification. The literature that was reviewed for this section varied in the term used for ethnicity identification, thus the sections are group according to how the study identified the each Hispanic group.

### **History of Women and the Superintendency**

White men have historically dominated the top executive position in educational administration. Kowalski (2010) states “because white men have always constituted the vast majority of superintendents, the experiences of women received limited attention until the 1980’s” (p. 85). Hibbits (2008) reports “research on female administrators and gender issues flourished in the 1970’s and was specific to the superintendency in the 1980’s and 1990s” (p. 16). Three distinctive patterns occurred over time regarding the representation of female superintendents nationwide: (1) males dominated the superintendent position throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century; (2) between 1910 and 1970, females began to “integrate the superintendency” increasing to 8.9% in 1910 and 10% in 1930 while declining to 3% in 1970, (3) from 1970 to 1998 women began to “integrate the superintendency for a second time” increasing from 3% in 1970 to 10% in 1998 (Tallerico & Blount, 2004, p. 640). However, in 1982, the level of female representation

in the superintendency was a mere 1.2% (Kowalski, 2010). According to Glass, Bjork, and Brunner (2000) school board's perceptions have been that "women and minorities lack the ability to act as strong managers" and women are viewed unfavorably because of the fear that their administrative decisions will be based on emotion. Several researchers have concluded that the superintendent position has been defined and seen as men's work (Blount, 1998; Grogan, 1999; and Skrla, 1999).

Historically, women have not been able to sustain adequate representation in the superintendency in relation to their numbers in the profession. Studies indicate that gender related issues and biases continue to exist; continual attention to these issues is necessary.

### **Women's Movement**

Ell Flagg Young was the first female superintendent of Chicago schools from 1909 to 1915. Soon after becoming superintendent she declared;

Women are destined to rule the schools of every city. I look for a large majority of the big cities to follow the lead of Chicago in choosing a woman for Superintendent. In the near future we will have more women than men in executive charge of the vast educational system. It is woman's natural field, and she is no longer satisfied to do the greatest part of the work and yet be denied leadership. As the first woman to be placed in control of the schools of a big city, it will be my aim to prove that no mistake has been made and to show cities and friends alike that a woman is better qualified for this work than a man. (Blount, 1998, p.1)

Women were not able to sustain the superintendent representation that Ella Flagg had hoped for. Blount (1998) reports “women served as superintendents in far greater numbers earlier in this century than present” (p. 197). Throughout the suffrage movement and the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the overall percentage of female superintendents remained constant (14.13% in 1910; 17.95% in 1930; and 14.76% in 1950). The lowest level of representation for the 20<sup>th</sup> century occurred in 1970 with a quick decline to 4.14%. There was a slight improvement of women’s representation in the superintendency from 1970 to 1990, 6.3 %, however, these percentages are noticeably lower than the early century levels. (Blount,1998).

Ella Flagg Young led the way for future female superintendents and was a strong advocate for female representation in school leadership. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a small increase in female representation as educational administrators. This has been called the “golden age for women school leaders” (Blount, 1998, p. 1). Between 1910 and 1930 women were able to obtain leadership positions as lead teachers, principals, mid-level administrators, ultimately constituting 9% of superintendents. This has been credited to the women’s suffrage movement of that era. Women’s organizations and suffrage activists actively campaigned for female superintendent candidates. At that time superintendent positions in many states were elected rather than appointed positions (Tallerico & Blount, 2004). However, after 1930, the percentage of female superintendents decreased. Tallerico and Blount (2004) report that this decline was caused by changes in state policies that eliminated the election process of superintendents in an effort to “depoliticize education” (p. 643). In addition, new credential requirements for superintendents were adopted by most states, which required additional college

courses. Women were less likely to be admitted into higher education programs during that era. Overall, the percentage of female superintendents continued to decline after 1950, reaching the lowest level of the century in 1970.

### **Historical Patterns**

In studying historical patterns of female superintendents over the last 20 years Blount (1998) found women had more success in getting intermediate superintendent positions rather than local or state superintendencies. The intermediate position was a county position that was not only less prestigious, but also provided inferior compensation. Superintendents in these positions had less control of building level affairs. Further, these positions were elected whereas the local and state superintendent positions were appointed by local school boards or state officials. In 1812, New York created the first state superintendent position with other states soon following. These positions were created for the administration of the Land Ordinance of 1785, which required states to reserve lots for public schools. The state superintendent responsibilities included distributing proceeds from the sale of these lands to local school funds. Between 1950 and 1990 significant reorganization in school districts decreased the number of intermediate districts “from 3,095 in 1950 to one-fifth that number by 1990” (p. 4). This reorganization of school districts eliminated several of the intermediate superintendent positions which caused a decrease in female superintendents. Blount concludes that overall in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the percentage of female superintendents remained fairly stable, but dropped after World War II after men returned from war and gained employment in educational administration. Blount counters two common assumptions: that women made rapid progress after “the modern women’s movement;”

and, that the decline of female school administrators occurred gradually (p. 5). Her analysis “clearly shows that the decline happened both abruptly and relatively recently” (p. 5). Unfortunately, women have not been able to make the significant gains necessary in obtaining the superintendency which would create an equitable distribution between men and women in educational leadership.

### **Female Superintendents**

Tallerico and Blount (2004) report that scholars encounter difficulties when attempting to obtain accurate data on superintendents regarding gender and ethnicity. Brunner (1999) asserts “literature about the superintendency is sparse, however, good literature about the superintendency is even more difficult to find” (p. x). This statement reflects the current status of female superintendents. Although, research on this topic has recently emerged, the literature that is available is limited and accurate data is difficult to acquire. Counts specifying both gender and race are rarely reported, which makes it difficult to examine issues explicitly related to women and ethnicity. *The American School Superintendent Decennial Studies*, (1990, 2000, 2010), only report data by gender or race. Tallerico (1999) maintains “we still do not have an accurate, reliable, longitudinal, and comparable-across-states, database on superintendents, including information on gender, race, and ethnicity” (p. 43). The studies that have examined female superintendents have primarily or almost entirely have been done by other women. These studies include: Brunner, (1999), Blount, (1998), Grogan, (1996), Tallerico, (1999). and Galloway, (2006). Brunner (1999) contends “this is problematic, if only women find the topic important enough for further investigation, the cries for change will remain marginalized” (p. 1).

The literature (Jackson, 1999) categorizes barriers for women entering the superintendency into three categories: internal, external and androcentric. Internal barriers are the historical and societal pressures imposed on women to conform to certain traditional roles. External barriers are barriers that are stereotypical and the organizational structures that discriminate against women. The androcentric barriers are found in social norms which expect women to function like men when placed in a traditional “male” role (Jackson, 1999). Female superintendents continuously navigate through these barriers considering the “superintendency has been and remains a masculine role” (Kowalski, 2010, p. 17).

### **Stereotypes**

Tallerico and Blount (2004) state that the superintendent role “has been defined and institutionalized as men’s work” (p. 642). Brunner and Grogan (2007) describe stereotypical perceptions of gender roles within educational administration. These subtly pervasive attitudes emphasize the nurturing aspect of teaching, thereby feminizing this role. At the same time, by accentuating the expectation for administrators to be considered work of nurturing, while administration is perceived as “take charge of the school or district” (p. 13), they masculinize those responsibilities. According to Brunner and Grogan the work of “teaching is feminized and the work of administration is masculinized” thus women entering into the superintendent role move from a “feminized culture to masculine one” (p. 14). Tallerico and Blount (2004) report that women crossing over into administrative roles encounter gender biases. Some of the biases include the informal networking and sponsorship practices that are dominated by white males. Tallerico calls these “subtle forms of sex discrimination that reproduce men’s

dominance in the role” which marginalize and isolate females from the superintendency (p. 642).

Duwe and Mendez-Morse (2012) suggest that sex-role stereotyping imputes certain traits based on gender. Desirable masculine characteristics include “aggressiveness and rational [behavior]” while “emotional and talkative” qualities are seen as feminine, and perhaps less desirable (p. 10). These types of gender stereotypes and misguided perceptions contribute to the overt sex discrimination practices that women encounter when seeking the superintendency. Female administrators are “challenged by cultural norms and gender structured opportunities that favor men” (Duwe & Mendez-Morse, 2012, p.11). Yet, some women have been able to navigate successfully through these barriers and eventually obtain the superintendent position.

### **Selection Process**

The traditional selection process for superintendents tends to limit accessibility to the superintendent position for women. Tallerico (2000) examined the informal process that school boards and consulting companies follow when seeking a new superintendent. She states “a number of sociocultural biases and other unwritten rules of the superintendent search and selection process present unique challenges for women and others who are unlike, white male superintendents” (p. 137). The sociocultural biases include the traditional predominant belief systems that have perpetuated the status quo of white males in executive positions. The unwritten rules are the unstated agreements by key decision makers of what best fit means and looks like. Those who dominate school organizations set the parameters of acceptance of how school leadership “is to be and not to be in terms of both role and identity” (Tooms, 2010, p. 113). Tooms reported that

generally in an Anglo-centric community school administrators are identified as being White, Protestant heterosexual, and male. This concept of what best fit looks and acts like places limits on candidates who are not members of this dominant culture and their status is someone “who does not fit” (p. 114).

Tallerico (2000) presents Radich’s 1992 study which revealed “that 65% of school board members indicate that gender had been a discussion item during the selection process”(p. 94). Her study exposes the overt and subtle biases that women encounter. Some of the overt biases exposed were the negative preconceived expectations that board members had of women. Other overt biases were revealed through prejudicial questioning by school board members during the interview process. Consultants explained that they commonly had to defy old myths regarding a women’s ability to do discipline, budget, and get the job done. One example of gender expectations came from a school board member in his explanation of why a female candidate was not hired when he stated. “The discussion was that, well, the guy, the successful hire, had lost his job and had a family to support. And she has a husband.” (p. 94). Another school board member commented to a female candidate. “Harry (the former superintendent) and I used to go out after board meetings and have a drink. We were very close. We did a lot of things together” (p. 93). This comment is a not-so-subtle way of saying a female would not fit in. Other examples of subtle biases included voiced beliefs of gender stereotypes. For example one school board member commented. “You know, what the hell does she know about a damn school bus if it breaks?” (p. 93). Another board member admits. “Sure, gender biases still exist on boards. Even, when the woman candidate becomes a finalist, then the question becomes, do we have to pay her as much as the male contenders” (p.

93). Other subtle biases that Tallerico includes are expectations regarding the marital status of female candidates. Women who are divorced, unmarried, or single parents are less desirable candidates and in general females tend to outnumber males in the divorced, unmarried, and single parent groups. In addition, Tallerico emphasizes that “subconscious preferences for affiliation with those most like ourselves” affect groups that are not like the interviewing group (p. 108). Glass (2000) reports that most school district boards have a majority of males on the school board who are reluctant to hire women for superintendent positions. Kamler and Shakeshaft (1999) revealed perceptions of typical board members embraced stereotypical myths about women. In their study search consultants quoted board members as saying “women are too emotional and can’t see things rationally and women are not as strong in dealing with the major issues as men would be” (p. 56). One consultant stated that he had encountered negative attitudes regarding women from men when working with search committees. This consultant recalls a board member saying “Don’t, whatever you do, bring any ‘Broads’ to us in the finals” (p. 51). These comments contribute to institutional patterns that can be viewed as discriminatory practices that prevent women from advancing into superintendent positions. Duwe and Mendez-Morse (2010) report that these types of practices “cause women to behave in self-limiting ways, because they are locked into low power, low visibility, dead-end jobs” that do not lead to the superintendency (p. 12).

The work experience of prospective superintendent candidates is a key factor in the superintendent search and for some women this can be a shortcoming. Glass (2000) found that women are not normally in positions that lead to the superintendency. Kamler and Shakeshaft (1999) reported “women and minorities may be at a disadvantage in some

respects in that they may not have had the length of experience at certain levels” (p. 57). The most common career path has been assistant principal, principal, and then central office administrator. 16 % of female superintendents tend to follow this traditional career path (Brunner & Grogan, 2007). Administrative experience at the secondary levels is often the first step into the superintendent position (Glass, 2000). Search consultants and board members typically seek experience at the secondary level. Tallerico (2000) reports that experience as a high school principal is considered the traditional training ground for superintendents and few women are in these positions.

Kowalski (2010) compares male and female career paths to the superintendency. He reports that women start off as elementary school teachers and males as high school teachers. In comparison to their male counterparts, women remain in teaching positions longer than males and enter administrative positions later. In addition, males tend to obtain superintendent positions at an earlier age than women. According to Tallerico (2000) “ a particular age that may appear to be the twilight of an educational career path for males may not be that at all for female administrators and superintendent candidates” (p. 78). These factors contribute to barriers women encounter when seeking the superintendent position but are not always a deterrent for aspiring to the superintendency.

### **Female Superintendents of Color**

The literature on female superintendents of color remains limited and only provides data on African American and Hispanic female superintendents. Literature on other racial and ethnic groups cannot be found (Tallerico, 1999). Benham (1997) reports that little has been said about the differences in beliefs and practices of ethnic minority women. This type of research remains overlooked in more recent literature. Arguments

justifying the lack of research on this topic include the lack of representation of these minority groups in educational leadership and the limited number of women researchers of color exploring these issues (Benham, 1997). These issues need additional examination.

Benham (1997) reiterates the fact that there are few ethnic minority women in traditional school leadership positions, such as superintendents, principals, and assistant principals. The lack of representation of ethnic minority women in these roles creates limitations on gathering sufficient data regarding issues specific to these groups. In her 1997 qualitative study of three minority female school leaders, self-identified as African American, Indian, and Cuban. Benham explored their different cultural and professional stories regarding leadership practices. Although these women were not superintendents or applying for superintendent positions they did possess leadership positions at the campus level. Their stories revealed struggles with “overt and passive racism” and marginalization (p. 280). As one participant stated, “The most difficult moment right now for me is having to deal with the overt and passive racism that exists in our public school system”. She continues this perception of racism and sexism by stating, “We have to confront head-on those who doubt our intellectual capabilities because we’re black or brown and women” (p. 288). Another participant stated, “It’s a good ‘ole boy system, it’s a white system. Women are not valued in this organization, let alone minority women who are assertive. Look at the central office, you can count people of color in decision-making positions on one hand” (p. 295). This participant added that she had been labeled an “angry Hispanic woman” because of her advocacy for minority children and openly expressing that people of color have limited leadership opportunities in the district (p.

295). These statements affirm issues of race and gender that women of color encounter as they navigate the educational leadership role. These women's stories represent barriers women encounter against mass "stereotypes that serve to oppress women", yet, these women have successfully navigated educational leadership roles and have "forged her own identity against mass stereotypes" with a strong sense of self (p. 283).

### **African American Female Superintendents**

Alston (2005) reports that "Black women not only have had to negotiate sexism in society but they have also had to deal with racism" (p. 681). However, Jackson (1999) found that gender was the impeding negative factor for African American female superintendents rather than race. She states that "Black women as a group experience a world different from those who are not Black or female" (p. 80). Pigford and Tonnsen (1993) imply that black women are systemically oppressed by society and are socialized to be second-class citizens because of both race and gender. These women are descendants from slaves and are part of a minority group that has historically experienced racism and oppression. Alston refers to the African American female superintendent as tempered radicals which is defined as "individuals who identify with and are committed to their organizations and also to a cause, community, or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and possibly at odds with the dominant culture of their organization" (p. 677).

While women represent a minority in the superintendency there are fewer black women in the position (Alston, 1999). Jackson (1999) reports that at the national level the number of African American female superintendents has remained below 50 and based on the 2011-12 Texas School District Directory currently there are only 2 in Texas. The

underrepresentation of black women in the superintendency has been linked to the view that the position has become “increasingly more challenging for blacks, particularly black women” and when they do obtain a superintendent position they are placed in “difficult urban centers or older suburban communities” (Alston, 1999, p. 80). These schools are often “found in poorly maintained and badly managed urban school districts with high minority populations (Alston, 2005, p. 681). Jackson (1999) reports what is unique to African American female superintendents, is that they have been placed in major cities such as: Berkley, Cleveland, Boston, Memphis, San Diego, Denver, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Washington D.C. At the time of this study (1993-94), only 32 African American female superintendents were identified in the United States. A follow-up to this study, conducted in 1996-97, revealed that 18 of these women were no longer in office, and the representation of African American women had not increased.

Alston (2005) asserts that little research has been completed regarding the recruitment, retention, and the role of the Black female superintendent. The limited research which is available on African American women is helpful in understanding experiences of this minority group, however, differences in experiences exist among different minority groups. Roth (2005) acknowledges that feminists of color are aware of the different barriers that exist among different minority female groups which is “simultaneously one against sexism, racism, and class oppression” (p. 166). Sandoval (1997) emphasizes that the history of Mexican American women is distinctly different from white and black women. Roth (2005) states, “Black women had opportunities to attend Black sponsored institutions” however, “Chicanas had no choice but to endure isolation on white college campuses” (p. 38). Even though, Mexican American women

and black woman have had to contend with both sexism and racism drawing social parallels among these two groups should be avoided. The exploration of the different experiences of women from Hispanic descent will help us understand and identify the constraints that exist for this ethnic group.

### **Latina Superintendents**

This section includes the review of the literature that has focused on the experiences of aspiring Latina superintendents and practicing Latina superintendents. The majority of research that has been conducted on Latina educational leaders has been done by Flora Ida Ortiz, 1994, 1998, 2002, and 2001. She is the pioneer of this topic and has published a variety of articles that focus on Latina superintendents. There are other women who have studied the experiences of Latina superintendents (Couch, 2007; Gonzalez, 2007; Rodriguez-Reyes, 2004; Valverde, 1998). The majority of this research has been conducted as dissertation studies (Couch, 2007; Gonzalez, 2007; Rodriguez-Reyes, 2004). These studies provide information regarding experiences of Latina's as superintendents. The literature indicates that Latina's are placed in school districts that are experiencing budget restraints, high administrator turnover, tensions among school board members, and high percentage of Hispanic students (Couch, 2007; Ortiz, 1998). The research did not emerge until the late 1990's and provides limited data on Latina superintendents. The first study on this topic was conducted in 1998, with subsequent work in 2004, and the most current study was conducted in 2007. School districts have experienced significant changes within the last few years which have impacted high stakes testing and accountability, student demographics, and school finance. The changes also impact how superintendents address these issues. There is a need to continue to

explore the various issues related to Latinas in school administration, which will provide a comprehensive understanding of Latina career patterns as they aspire and advance to the superintendency.

**Latino culture.** It is important to understand the cultural influences that Latinas encounter and how they struggle to find their own identity in different contexts. They experience a variety of cultural influences that shape their personal identity. Culture is learned and the social environment cultivates one's culture and shapes their identity. Hofstede (2010) defines culture as the "collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (p. 7). Hofstede presents aspects of culture as having four dimensions: power distance, collectivism versus individualism, femininity versus masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance. Power distance is defined as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (p. 61). In a collectivist society "the interest of the group prevails over the interest of the individual" (p. 90). Hofstede describes collectivism and individualism social values as opposites. In a collectivist society "the interest of the group prevails over the interest of the individual" (p. 91). In individualist societies "every one is expected to look after him or herself" and ties among individuals are "loose" (p. 519). Social roles based on gender exist in all societies and the culture of the society determines whether the social culturally determined roles are defined as masculine or feminine. Hofstede states that in most societies "men are supposed to be assertive, competitive and tough. Women are supposed to be more concerned with taking care of the home, of the children, and take the tender roles" (p. 138) Uncertainty avoidance "the extent to which the members of a culture feel

threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations” thus for predictability purposes written and unwritten rules are established so members know how to interact within the group (p. 191). Each dimension can be measured relative to other cultures. The majority of people in the world live in collectivist societies. The United States has been categorized as an individualist society, whereas the Mexican culture is traditionally a collectivist society. Mexican American women are raised with collectivist ideals where a woman’s “sense of self is based on affiliation with the group and responsibility to other members of the group, rather than on personal achievement for her own ends” (Trumbull, Rothstein, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001, p. 12). She is quickly integrated into an individualist society once she enters the United States school system that educates children using the traditional European-American model (Trumbull et al., 2001). The integration of different cultural dimensions creates identity conflicts for Latinas. “A third generation Chicana finds herself reared by traditionally oriented parents, educated by middle class standards, thrown into a society whose values are familiar with but they may be against her upbringing” (Flores, 1997 p. 95).

The modern Latina has evolved from the stereo-typical submissive role to a more confident and assertive role (Garcia, 1997). The Chicana Movimiento, led by Chicana Feminists in the late 1960’s throughout the late 1990’s, proclaimed that the Mexican American women’s main issue was self- identity (Flores, 1975; Garcia, 1997; NietoGomez, 1974; Nieto, 1974; Riddel, 1974). These ideologies developed as a result of the second wave feminists movement where women of color challenged white feminist thought which conceptualized feminism as homogenous (Roth, 2004). Chicanas’ political consciousness is grounded in a fundamentally different reality than that of white

feminists, because of the historical racial suppressions of Chicanas. At the same time, Chicanas share a physical, cultural, and material vulnerability than that of Chicanos (Segura & Pesquera, 1992). Anzaldúa (2006) claimed that in the Mexican American cultural women are considered selfish when they do not surrender to traditional gender role expectations and the struggle of the Chicana is “above all a feminist one” (p. 84). Chicana feminist theory recognizes that Mexican American women have struggled with inequalities which differed from the white woman’s struggle and their feminist movement included confronting both sexism and racism (Garcia, 1997; Roth, 2004; Sandoval, 2000). Chicana feminists acknowledged that Mexican American women had also been marginalized by their own culture (Garcia, 1997). The men had the power; the women were expected to accept the value system created by men and display a subservient role (Anzaldua, 1987). The Catholic Church played a key role in influencing gender expectations. Nieto (1997) wrote “It has clearly defined the woman’s role as that of wife and mother, requiring obedience to one’s husband” (p. 208). Mexican American women have had to overcome the challenge of the traditional sex-role expectations that have been governed for many years by tradition and culture (Quilantan & Ochoa, 2004). In Quilantan’s 2002 study, one Latina superintendent says “I think that there are some Mexican Americans, it depends on where you were brought up and how, but women are not raised to be assertive, Mexican American little girls are not brought up to be assertive, to show leadership skills, maybe the boys are, but not the girls” (p. 193). Some Mexican American women have chosen to defy the traditional sex –role stereotypes and assert themselves in a traditional masculine occupation, such as the superintendency.

**Selection of Latina superintendents.** Flora Ida Ortiz has continuously conducted research on issues related to Latina educational administrators and superintendents (Ortiz, 1982, 1998, 2001). Her studies have provided essential information concerning the perceptions and experiences of Latina superintendents. One of her first studies focused on the selection process of Latina superintendents. Ortiz (1998) examined how 12 Latinas were selected to lead school districts in the southwestern United States. At the time of the study, there were more than 4 million professional educators in the United States with fewer than 1000 female superintendents and only 30 Hispanic females. The women in this study differed in their educational and work experiences, as well as the type of districts they led. Ortiz found the women who were appointed to the superintendent position were hired to lead school districts that had high proportions of minority students and were experiencing turmoil. One board member stated “this district has been in disarray for several years, we need a superintendent who can calm the Hispanic community, represent it to the rest of the community, and move the district forward” (Ortiz, 1998, p. 96). The Latina that was appointed to the superintendent position for that school district stated “from a distance it looks like a desirable district, but it’s financial and personnel troubles have been so serious, no one could clean them up, I was hired as the last resort” (Ortiz, 1998, p.97). Ortiz suggests these types of districts are viewed as less desirable by other prospective superintendents and that the perception of stable districts exists when the appointment is not meant to “change or disrupt the district” (p. 96). Couch (2007) concurs with Ortiz’s conclusions that Latina superintendents are appointed in school districts in turmoil. She reports that all three of the Latina superintendents in her study were selected to serve in unstable school districts. A former

superintendent of one the school districts had mismanaged funds, another school district was on the verge of being shut down by the state, and the third district had not been able to complete construction projects. The aspiring Latina superintendents that were not successful in obtaining the position had applied in school districts that were perceived as stable. Ortiz (1998) described the interpretation of a stable district when the community asks that the appointment not “change or disrupt the district” (p. 96). According to Couch (2007), “Latinas are more likely to be appointed to unstable school districts and Latinas who apply in stable districts are overlooked” (p. 167).

Latinas are typically sought after by search committees when school districts are seeking specific skills and experience and their selection is linked to someone they know personally. Ortiz (2001) introduces the notion of social capital and shows how three Latinas established their superintendent careers by applying social capital. Ortiz defines social capital as developing trust and cooperation “through structures of personal relationships and strong networks” (p. 62). These women were successful in attaining extensive networking with influential social networks that included mentors, community members, and family. They maintained strong trusting relationships with each social network. Ortiz (1998), reports that Latina superintendents are “matched to specific contexts” (p. 96). In other words, their skills are expected to match the needs of the school district, particularly when the ability to speak Spanish and communicate and interact effectively with a Hispanic community is seen as vital. Some school districts specifically advertised for a bilingual superintendent who could address matters associated with an increase in the Hispanic population. When search committees advertise for these certain criteria, perceptions of community leaders indicate that schools

are in trouble (Ortiz, 1998). One community leader is quoted as saying “if the interview list includes a Spanish surname, you can be sure this district has some problems, the more serious the school district is about hiring a Hispanic, the surer you can be that there is trouble” (Ortiz, 1998, p. 98). These sentiments indicate that some districts are less desirable than others, which deter other applicants from seeking these positions. Latina superintendents are able to attain the superintendent position in school districts when the “leader and the community are similar, both influenced by similar culture and life experiences” (Quilantan, 2002, p. 125).

**Ethnic biases.** Ortiz (1998) concludes that the appointment of Hispanic females to the superintendent position has symbolic and political overtones for the school district and community. This type of appointment can be problematic for both the district and the individual who has been appointed because of the impact to the existing organizational structure. The appointment can create apprehension among community members who are concerned that a Hispanic female superintendent will act in favor of “her own group” (Ortiz, 1998, p. 99). Pre-existing perceptions include skepticism of a Hispanic woman’s ability to be a fair and effective leader based on gender and ethnicity factors. One principal stated, “her Hispanic background and the fact that she speaks another language certainly helps the Hispanics here” (Ortiz, 1998, p. 99). This statement insinuates that the Latina superintendent will favor the Hispanic population. The superintendent in this district stated “you cannot change values and there are still people saying, what the hell are we doing with a Hispanic superintendent here, she does not know what she’s talking about, people look for any slipping of decisions or error” (Ortiz, 1998, p.99). Gonzalez (2007) found similar perceptions from board members in her study consisting of four

Latina superintendent aspirants. One of the participants stated that during the selection process one of the male board members asked, "How will you work with the Hispanic community, and will you be fair and unbiased?" (Gonzalez, 2007, p. 42). These sentiments create dilemmas for Latinas when having to justify their credentials because of their ethnicity. Couch (2007) found that Latinas were more likely to obtain the superintendency by "melding their cultural and linguistic identities with that of the White majority" (p. viii). This "melding of cultural" is similar to Hofstede's (2010) collectivism versus individualism. The collectivist obtains power by being part of a group which he refers to as the "we group or in group" and that the we group is "the major source of one's identity and the only secure protection one has against the hardships of life" (p. 91). Hofstede refers to the United States as a country composed of immigrants with their own traditional culture. Some minority groups assimilate into the dominant culture "the melting pot" while others retain their traditional culture and group identity over generations (p. 45). Mexican American groups tend to assimilate into the dominant culture while trying to retain some of their traditional identities. In her study, Quilantan (2002) includes the concept of assimilation through appearance. She quotes a co-worker of a Mexican American female superintendent as saying "I think that females that look Mexicanish or the probability of seeing someone really short heavysset, dark skinned, hair pulled back, in a bun or something like that is probably non-existent" (p. 193). Latina superintendents cope with the barriers of obtaining the superintendency by developing coping mechanisms that address gender and ethnic biases and refine themselves throughout their administrative career.

**Gender biases.** In addition to ethnicity issues, Latina superintendent aspirants, encounter overt gender biases that add to constraints for them during the selection process. Gonzalez (2007) reported the experience of one Latina seeking the superintendent position. This Latina had moved to the second phase of the selection process which was a second interview with the school board. During the interview, she was surprised with some of the questions and comments from board members. One board member asked, "How do you feel about being the boss of men" and another board member commented, "You are so tiny and young" (p. 42). This aspirant said, "I guess I began to see the mentality of what people are used to, the status quo, which is a man, older than 50, white" (p. 42). Couch (2007) reports that one of the participants in her study was offered the superintendent position but was offered \$10,000 less than the advertised salary. This aspirant said, "We negotiated but it kind of fell by the wayside and so I did not take the superintendency, later I heard through the wayside that one board member was the one that did not want to offer me more money because I was a woman and I was Hispanic" (p. 171). She reported that a Hispanic male was selected for this position and was offered the original advertised salary. These experiences indicate that Latinas continue to encounter sexism when seeking the superintendent position.

These challenges are addressed in the literature. Couch (2007) states "the superintendency is a difficult position in and of itself; however, as a minority woman, it has been even more challenging" (p. 11). Couch explored the experiences of three Latinas who had successfully obtained the superintendent position and compared their experiences and perceptions to three aspiring Latinas who had interviewed for the position but did not get the job. Her study is unique not only because of the topic of the

research but also she as the researcher was one of the few Latina superintendents in the state of New Mexico. She states “as a woman and a member of a majority minority group, I empathized with the women participating in my research study as I, too, encountered a number of barriers in my administrative career” (p. 11). The absence of mentors for Latinas as an obstacle is well documented in the literature (Couch, 2007; Gonzales, 2007; Quilantan; 2002, need citations here). Couch emphasizes the importance of mentorship for Latina upward mobility in educational administration. Latinas gain confidence and encouragement when they receive support from mentors who are from the same ethnicity. The participants in her study mentioned that mentors encouraged them to seek the superintendency; however, after being selected for the position, they did not have access to Latina superintendents for mentorship. One participant stated, “What I really needed was a mentor when I went into the superintendency; there was no mentor... not really a person that was mentoring me, that guided me, or was giving me advice” (p. 180).

The literature presents the superintendency as a lonely place for Latinas (Couch, 2003; Mendez-Morse; 1997). The inability to network creates feelings of isolation for the Latina superintendents as well as the hierarchal structure of school administration. Latina woman are unable to develop relationships with peers as confidants, since their position places them at the highest level of the organization above all other members. They also feel that they have to work harder than their male counterparts, which causes them to spend several hours at the office. Personal time and friendships were affected by the long hours, which created additional feelings of loneliness. One Latina superintendent stated, “It’s very lonely at the top, because you really can’t talk to anyone” (Couch, 2002,

p. 183). A different participant was quoted as saying “So you spend all your time trying to prove you have the ability to do what it is that you have to do...I gave up a lot of family time. No leisure time whatsoever” (p.183). One of the superintendents in Mendez-Morse’s study expressed a similar sentiment, “There’s just something about this position that you are alone” (p. 249). Latina superintendents demonstrate a strong sense of self and determination and are willing to endure whatever challenges the position presents.

Within the selection process, the school board has the final authority in the appointment of the superintendent and sometimes employs search consultants to assist. Ortiz (1998) reports that the organizational make up of school boards and executive cabinets are comprised of mostly men who do not have access to information regarding perspective and capable Hispanic women. Couch (2007) reported all the Latina women in her study encountered barriers during the selection process. She found that the school boards that were governed primarily by males were less likely to hire a Latina. The Latina’s who were successful in obtaining the superintendent position had been hired by school boards that had Hispanic representation with both male and female board members. Couch reports a crucial aspect for the Latinas that were successful in obtaining the superintendent position was the ability to relate to individual school board members and community members. One of the participants in her study explained during the community forum “I was probably able to shine the most, I could answer the questions off the floor, and I was speaking from my heart and not just what they wanted to hear, because I knew if there’s a match, it’s a match” (p.128). This participant felt she connected with the community and as a result was offered the superintendent position.

**Differences in ethnicity identification.** These researchers have provided fundamental information regarding the experiences of aspiring Latina superintendents and those who were successful in obtaining the position. In these studies, Latina is used to identify the ethnicity of all the women, however, when asked to identify their ethnicity the responses of the women varied. This variation of ethnicity identification is common among Hispanic groups. Gonzalez and Gandra (2005) draw distinctions between the terms Hispanic and Latino/o. They state that “Latino connotes diversity, brownness and Latin America, whereas Hispanic a term used by the Census Bureau signifies uniformity Whiteness and Spain” (p. 392). Gonzalez and Gandra maintain that Latino refers to persons of Hispanic origins living in the United States and the term evolved as a result of the political opposition to the Anglo influence. They stress that “Most Latinos see themselves primarily in terms of nationalities, Mexican, Cuban and so forth” thus distinctions when referring to Hispanic groups needs to be clarified (p. 396). The participants in Couch’s (2007) study were reflective of how individuals from Hispanic descent vary in self-ethnic identification. The women either identified themselves as Hispanic, Latina, or Chicana. In Couch (2007), one participant stated, “throughout my life I have been called Chicana, Latina, Hispana, whatever I really don’t care what I’m called by others but I prefer to call myself Hispanic American or Spanish American”. This participant’s paternal grandmother was from Spain and came to United States when she was a child. Another participant who also identified herself as Hispanic was of Mexican descent and said that in her community, the term Hispanic was used instead of Latina. She stated “it’s real funny that I have been corrected by a couple of ladies saying traditionally if your roots are from Mexico and you’ve been in America for so many

years and so many generations, you're not Latina you're Hispanic, I consider myself Hispanic" (p. 134). One of the participants who identified herself as Chicana, preferred Chicana because of her Mexican heritage and believed that Latina best described someone from Latin America. Another participant identified herself as Chicana then Hispanic. She said, "I was involved in many of the movements for La Raza for Chicanos and I don't view it as a derogatory term, in terms of Hispanic that is more of a political statement to identify all those from Hispanic background from any Spanish speaking country" (p.125). The literature on Latina superintendents has limitations regarding the differences that exist among specific ethnic groups. Different ethnic groups experience different social and cultural issues. In order to understand educational leadership issues specific to Mexican American women, the review of literature included studies exclusive to this group.

### **Mexican American Female Superintendents**

Research on women in educational administration has primarily focused on White women, and there was a problematic assumption that the administrative career paths of White women and minority women were similar (Mendez-Morse, 1997). The studies on female superintendents do provide an understanding of certain constraints women experience as they seek the superintendent position and how they have managed to overcome these barriers. Studies on minority female superintendents reveal that women of color experience additional constraints (Alston, 1999; Jackson, 1999). The literature on Latina Superintendents has been examined by very few scholars (Ortiz, 1999; Couch, 2007; Gonzalez, 2007) and these studies indicate that Latinas experience constraints created by gender and ethnic biases, sex-role stereotypes and cultural expectations. There

is an insufficient amount of research that has explored the experiences of Mexican American women, which are a subset of the Latina experience. The review of the literature reveals that only two researchers have focused exclusively on this ethnic group, and two of these studies emerged through dissertations (Mendez-Morse, 1997; Mendez-Morse, 1999; Quilantan, 2002).

Mendez-Morse (1997) began this inquiry by examining the experiences of Mexican American women as they attained their superintendent position. Quilantan (2002) examined the personal and professional characteristics of Mexican American female superintendents. These studies give voice to Mexican American female superintendents who need to be heard in-order to understand the differences of their experiences as they seek and successfully obtain the superintendent position. The literature indicates that Mexican American women encounter social and cultural barriers associated with gender and ethnic stereotyping. The women that have been able to overcome these barriers and obtain the superintendency not only overcame the societal barriers but defied their cultural role expectations.

**Cultural expectations.** According to Quilantan (2002) one of the prevalent obstacles that the Mexican American female superintendent encountered was a gender bias associated with sex-role stereotypes. The literature reveals that women face many challenges when seeking the superintendency, but “sex-role stereo-typing are more common and evident among Mexican American women” (Quilantan, 2002, p.2). Quilantan states that the Mexican American culture is governed by a value system that has been in place for many years, which dictates behaviors of docility and passivity in young Mexican American women. These behaviors are displayed in their personal and

professional settings. Anzaldua (1987) informs us that in the traditional Mexican American culture men control the power and make the rules. She states “the culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males” if she rebels she is a “*mujer mala*” (bad woman) (p. 17). Mexican American women are considered “*hociconas*” (big mouths) when they are out-spoken (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 16). Marriage is highly expected from women in this culture and “women are made to feel like total failures if they don’t marry and have children” “*Y cuando te casas, Se te va a pasar el tren*”(when will you get married, the train is going to pass you by) (Anzaldua, p. 17). Mexican American women are considered selfish when they do not surrender to these role expectations (Anzaldua, 1987). In the Mexican American culture “selfishness is condemned, especially in women and if you “get above yourself, you’re an *envidiosa* (envious) and if you don’t behave like everyone else, *la gente* (people) will say that you think you’re better than others, *que te crees grande*” (Anzaldua, p. 18). According to Anzaldua (1987), ambition is valued in the Anglo culture and condemned in the Mexican culture. These expectations that have been placed on Mexican American women create personal pressures for women when they seek the superintendency.

Quilantan (2002) examined the personal and professional characteristics of 10 Mexican American female superintendents in Texas during the 2001-2002 school -year. At the time of the study, there were 1,778 superintendents in Texas and only 10 were Mexican American women. .

There was an apparent pattern in the types of school districts for which the women were selected. They all served in smaller school districts near the Texas/Mexico border, the largest school district had a student population of 6, 992, The women were conscious that

some school districts may consider them as less desirable candidates and applying at particular school districts could be more challenging. One Mexican American superintendent mentioned that she had not experienced problems in South Texas as a Mexican American administrator but did say “I bet, I would have more problems applying for the superintendency as a Mexican American woman in northern Texas. I am sure, I would have difficulty there” (p. 194). Quilantan expressed “sex-role stereotypes and ethnic biases were still apparent in the conversations” of the Mexican American female superintendents (p. 222). The study also revealed that the women had to withstand cultural and personal pressures that are associated with the conservative traditional Mexican American home. One board member stated, “if a woman is appointed to the superintendency, then who will take care of the children and household” (p. 224). A different board member commented “women have a need to be a mother and wife first, and that being a superintendent interfered with their primary needs” (p. 191). Even with the existing sex-role biases, the Mexican American female superintendents considered their gender as an asset for the position,

We have been programmed or conditioned, as women, mothers, and career women to do anything. I mean when you are even a mother and raising her children, you can't say, I am going to take care of the baby and forget the two year old outside and the seven year old playing video games. You have to be on top of everything and you have to be cooking, cleaning, and doing this and doing that. You learn to do multiple things and so that carries you to the world of work because the world of work has many things, you know going on at the same time. (p. 167)

Quilantan's analysis identified negative perceptions of the superintendents' husbands when they did not meet the profile of the traditional masculine role. The superintendent husbands that attended their wives' board meetings, ran errands and assisted with household chores were viewed as "intrusive of the district affairs and viewed negatively by community members" (p. 225). One community member stated, "He does not work because he is too busy catering to his wife" (p. 224).

All of the 10 superintendents in the study were over the age of 40, married, with grown children except for one, who chose not to have children so she could pursue her administrative career. Each one stated that the demands of the job did not allow them to spend enough time with their families. However, their families were supportive of their careers and Quilantan (2002) asserts this is a type of social capital. The method of support that they received from their families varied. Some of the women reported that their children and husbands were used to their demanding schedules and they shared the household chores. One reported that she accepted the superintendent position in another town and her husband stayed behind to run his own business. Another reported that her husband left his administrative position at a bank to follow her. Some of the personal pressure that these women placed upon themselves was the personal sense of having to prove their credibility. One pointed out, "the difficulties that I experienced as a Mexican American woman administrator have been primarily in establishing credibility at the very, very beginning, because you have people questioning whether you would be able to carry forth this position" (p. 194). They felt that they had to do more than their male-counter parts. The women articulated that as a Mexican American female superintendent they had to perform at a higher level than others. One participant maintained, "People

somehow need to be convinced that a woman, and especially a Mexican American woman can take on such a, such a difficult position as the superintendency. And so you have to weather it out; and you have to do the best that you know how” (p. 167). Another concluded, “As much as I don’t want to say this, in reality... women have to work twice as hard to achieve and prove themselves because it’s still a man’s world in the area of superintendency” (p. 167). Although, participants of this study were able to achieve the balance to overcome societal, cultural, and personal obstacles, these traits were not always viewed as positive (Quilantan, 2002).

**Redefining role expectations.** Mendez-Morse (1997) explored the experiences and the meaning of the experiences of four Mexican American women as they became superintendents. Two of these women were superintendents in New Mexico, and two were superintendents in Texas. The results of this study revealed that the “women redefined themselves as they progressed through their administrative careers and this redefinition of self-continued through their experiences in becoming a superintendent” (p. vii). As they obtained the superintendent position, they “formed new definitions of themselves that included being a minority female responsible for leading a school district” (p. viii). Mendez-Morse (1999) reiterates the previous study and explains how the four women changed self-perceptions from potential superintendents “to women as eventual superintendents” (p. 129). These transformations occurred within three transitions. The first came with the decision to become superintendent; the second happened during the interview process; and the third occurred once they were selected for the superintendent position. These women redefined themselves by “rejecting, asserting, and claiming” (p. 139). They rejected the standard gender and ethnic bias that defines the

superintendent as a white male. They asserted their competence as superintendents and claimed themselves “as females capable and empowered to be superintendents by having rejected the limiting perceptions of who can be a superintendent” (p. 139). The appointment to the superintendency validated their credibility and they were able to envision themselves as women capable of leading a school district. The women felt their selection would be representative of other minority women and the pressure to perform well became a reality. These thoughts were expressed by two of the participants.

I felt a lot of pressure at that time from within myself because I thought, if I blow this, I have blown the chances for other women, so I had a lot of pressure on me as far as doing as good or better than male superintendents. (p.286)

I knew that I’d be seen as a role model. It was a little scary because I knew that I needed to be a good role model . . . this made it especially hard because, in my opinion, it was harder to get in and important to be good. Remember I had a double whammy against me: number one being a woman, number two being a Hispanic. (p. 286).

These women soon embraced the responsibilities of being a role model for other minority women and were confident in their abilities to lead a public school system. The women also realized that perceptions of them had changed and they were now positioned at the highest administrative position that separated them from others in the organization. They acknowledged their interactions with others were different and they were seen as the title of superintendent and no longer the person behind the title. One female shared. “When you hit the superintendency, you have to realize that all of sudden, you don’t become a person, you become a title” (p.288). One participant who was on her second

superintendency presents a slightly different perspective regarding the loneliness of the job. She states “In between my superintendencies, I saw that even in the men superintendents. It’s just a lonely job. You’re really alone; even if you’re surrounded by a lot of people, there’s something about that position that you’re alone” (p. 289).

The review of literature implies that these women are unique because very few Mexican American women have been successful in obtaining “the highest level of administrative responsibility in a public school system and have been neglected because of their absence in research studies” (Mendez- Morse, 1999, p. 125). The position is seen as an isolated one but these women publically assert their capabilities as a district leader and accept the major responsibilities associated with being a Mexican American female superintendent.

### **Conclusion**

The lack of research available on Mexican American female superintendents is related to the low numbers of representation by this group. Mendez-Morse (1999) declares that this lack of research is “a serious deficiency” (p. 126). The literature indicates that gender and ethnic biases, sex-role stereotyping, and societal and cultural expectations create constraints for Mexican American women aspiring to become superintendents. These constraints require additional attention in order to benefit educational leadership programs in preparing Mexican America females to overcome these barriers.

Mexican American women continue to encounter the same issues that white women challenged during the women’s movement. Quilantan (2002) states that the women’s movement began with the white woman’s fight for equal rights “but since the

movement was led by white women, Mexican American women felt that they were underrepresented and without a voice” (p. 4). They sought both gender and racial equalities through feminists groups known as the Chicana Movimiento. The Mexican American woman no longer accepts the suppressive roles that had been placed upon them and finds herself challenging traditional social and cultural ideologies. Anzaldua (1987) declares

The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode, nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else (p. 79). Latinos are the fastest growing minority population in the United States with Mexican Americans being the fastest growing in Texas. By 2040 Hispanics will account for 50% of the States populations (Texas State Data Center, 2000). The benefit of having a Mexican American female superintendent is self-evident. School districts benefit when Mexican American administrators are aligned in proportion to their Mexican American student enrollment. Mexican American female superintendents can serve as a role model to all children. It is clear from the literature that the representation of Mexican American female superintendents is inadequate and it is evident that more research regarding these issues is needed.

### **III. RESEARCH METHODS**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine and narrate the life experiences of Mexican American women who are current superintendents in Texas and their motivation for seeking the superintendency. We know little about the experiences of Mexican American female superintendents. This study explored, captured, and document the voices of a marginalized group of female superintendents. The method of inquiry was qualitative and the primary instrument for data collection and analysis was the researcher. The researcher was interested in providing an accurate representation and descriptive narrative of the complex personal stories of the participants. Marshall and Rossman (2006) describe qualitative inquiry as exploratory, descriptive research; a search for deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the participants of the phenomenon under study. Qualitative researchers attempt to make sense of a phenomenon in terms of the meaning people bring to it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) through detailed analysis of the thought processes, emotions, and experiences of the participants (Straus & Corbin, 1990). The strategies of qualitative inquiry provided this study with a rich descriptive narratives of seven Mexican American female superintendents. Further, the final analysis of their stories will contribute to the limited literature on this group and provide an in-depth understanding of their experiences. Qualitative research utilizes purposeful sampling in a naturalist setting. Data are collected through a variety of strategies, such as surveys, personal interviews, review of documents, and observations in real world settings (Patton, 2002). The following sections describe how these strategies were utilized through out the study in with the research design, selection of participants, data collection and analysis.

## Research Design

The undertaking of the researcher was to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of marginalized Mexican American female superintendents. The study applied qualitative research methods to obtain this understanding. Campbell-Evans (1992) acknowledges “the essence of qualitative research is to explore and understand a situation, issue, or question and to uncover the truth of it. If research is the search for truth and truth in this domain is believed to be a constructed reality, then the interpretation of truth is determined in part by the researcher’s view of the world” (p. 27). As the researcher for this study, my view of the world comes from a feminist’s perspective which considers the interactions of gender, ethnicity, culture, and social class as “key organizers of social life” (Sprague, 2005, p. 3). This study was shaped within the ideology that even though social norms have evolved and sex role stereotypes have been challenged by feminists, the Mexican American woman faces specific cultural barriers which prevent them from benefiting from all the gains made by feminist movements (Blea, 1977). This phenomenon was explored by utilizing a qualitative approach which captured the essence of individual experiences within the phenomenon. The purpose of the study is to add to the body of knowledge pertaining to female superintendents serving in a profession historically dominated by men thereby giving voice to the Mexican American female superintendent. Merriam (2009) defines qualitative researchers as those “interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in their world” (p. 13). Feminist theory and critical race theory guided this study. These theories served as a framework

for examining gender bias' and racism that contribute to the underrepresentation of minorities in the superintendency (Goffney & Edmonson, 2012).

The underlying concept for the study was grounded on feminist theory from the lens of Chicana feminist thought (Garcia, 1997). The framework of Chicana feminism is defined by Gallardo (1996) as a critical view which “looks at inequalities along lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality as they affect women of Mexican descent in the United States” (from introduction page, what is Chicana Feminism?) Feminist theory offers a gender lens that critiques societies' interactions of gender, race, ethnicity, and class, all of which tend to marginalize women. According to Sprague (2005) a gender lens “makes gender visible in social phenomena, asking if, how, and why social processes, standards and opportunities differ systematically in women and men” (p. viii). It is important to consider the voices and experiences of women when looking at educational leadership (Grogan, 2002). The voices of female administrators, offers a feminist perspective in a field where women have been marginalized for years. Lather (1992) claims that “studying women from the perspective of their own experiences enables us to better understand our situations in the world through research designed for women instead of simply research about women” (p. 5). Latina feminism expanded these critiques to include “traditional notions of ethnicity and nationalism, questioning Eurocentric feminist frameworks in relation to women of color” (Mignola, Silverblatt, & Saldibar-Hull, p. 2) Latina feminists point out that diverse identities for Latina women exist and the complex intersections of ethnicity, nationality, class, and gender are contributing factors for to self-identity. They acknowledged that cultural experiences of Latina women (Chicana, South American, Puertoriquena, Dominicana, and Cubana) varied, but avoided cross

comparison. Chicana feminists explore the complexities, which they believe to be exclusive to Mexican American women (Anzaldua, 1987; Garcia, 1997). Quilantan (2002) further elucidates Segura's and Pesquera's implication that Chicana feminists struggle to eradicate all forms of social inequality. This struggle is anchored within the social and political struggles of the Chicano/Latino community at large. Chicana feminist organizations, whether at the grass roots, state, national, or academic level advocate Chicana empowerment" (p. 72). Current Mexican American female superintendents can empower others by sharing the strategies that they used in obtaining their current position.

This was a phenomenological study that explored the cultural and social influences which continue to marginalize Mexican American woman in a historically male dominated profession. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) maintain that inquiry strategies connect the researcher to methods and approaches for collecting and analyzing material from the study. Merriam (2009) defines phenomenology as "a study of people's conscious experience of their life-world" (p. 25). Phenomenological inquiry "seek out the essential, invariant structure, or *essence* of the central meaning of the experience" and describes the lived experience of individuals who have experience the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998, p. 52). The phenomenon in this study is the lived experiences of Mexican American women in educational leadership and their experience in obtaining the superintendency in a profession where women are underrepresented. This phenomenological study investigated the challenges faced by Mexican American female superintendents, and the personal strategies they employed to meet those challenges and succeed in a position that has long been beyond the grasp of Mexican American women.

This study enhances the understanding of how some women are able to overcome the adversities of school organizations and successfully obtain the superintendency. The data for this study was collected through surveys, interviews, observations, and documents (see appendixes A-E).

### **Participants**

Purposeful selection of participants is essential in qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002, Yin, 2003). “People, organizations, communities, cultures, and events are selected because they are information rich and illuminative, they offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest; sampling, then, is aimed at insight of the phenomenon” (Patton, 2002, p. 40). The selection of participants for this study was criterion-based, described by Merriam (2009) as a “list of the attributes essential for the study and finding a unit matching the list” (p. 77). The selection of participants relied on potential participants who would provide in-depth information regarding the questions of the study. Creswell (1998) reiterates the importance of selecting participants who can articulate their conscious experience of the phenomenon being explored. He refers to this as “criterion” sampling, where “all individuals studied represent people who have experience the phenomenon” (p. 118). The primary source of information for this study came from the in-depth interviews with Mexican American female superintendents. Creswell (1998) recommends interviewing 10 subjects for a study. He acknowledges that the number of interviewees vary in phenomenological studies and “the important point is to describe the meaning of a small number of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon” (p. 122). The intent of the study was to portray a holistic picture of each individual experience within the context of the phenomenon. The participants in the study were : 1)

female; 2) Mexican American, and 3) a current superintendent in a public school district in the state of Texas. A list of potential participants who match the criteria was identified. The list of potential study participants was obtained from the Texas Education Agency 2011- 2012 Texas School District directory. The directory listed 1,144 superintendents employed in Texas, of which 233 were female. Not all names of the superintendents were easily identified as male or female. Therefore, the district websites were reviewed to determine gender. Once gender was determined, both first name and surnames were used to potentially identify Mexican American women. This method may not have accurately identified the ethnicity of all female superintendents because Latino surnames can include non-Latino women married to Latino spouses, moreover, Latinas with non-Latino surnames would not have been identified unless their name appeared to be a Latina name. The ethnicity of each female was substantiated by obtaining individual demographic data through telephone calls, emails, and a review of the biographic information from district websites. This process located 14 Mexican American female superintendents currently serving in Texas school districts.

The inclusion of participants was contingent on the willingness and ability of the women to participate in the study. A combination of strategies was utilized to select participants for the study. First, each potential participant received an electronic invitation to participate in the study, with a brief statement explaining the purpose of the study. A short questionnaire was included in the electronic email. This purpose of the survey was meant to gather demographic information about each potential participant (see appendix B). The email gave a brief description of the intent of the study and asked each potential participant to: 1) complete the survey and return it within seven days, and

2) complete the potential participant form if they were willing to participate in the study (see appendix C). Those who are interested in participating in the study received a consent form with information regarding ethical consideration and protecting anonymity (see appendixes A, C, & E). The researcher was cognizant that the work schedule of a superintendent is demanding. Because of this, the researcher followed up with phone calls to each of the superintendent's administrative assistant for assistance in making contact with the superintendents to discuss and clarify the research project with each superintendent. The phone call was the ideal opportunity to provide a personalized invitation to participate in the study and introduce myself. This was viewed as appropriate, because personal contact is considered respectful in the Hispanic culture and was important to remain culturally responsive of the participant's Mexican American heritage. The personal contact also emphasized the imperativeness of the study and the how participation of each individual superintendent could have implications on superintendent preparation programs.

Location and proximity was a consideration for the type of interview that would be conducted. Face to face interviews was the preferred method for the interviews, which would provide a rich descriptive of data. I was able to conduct face to face interviews with seven participants of the study. Six of the seven interviews were conducted at the superintendents' offices. One of the superintendents was attending a conference in San Antonio and agreed to meet with me in the hotel restaurant where she was staying to conduct the interview. An alternative proposal to the face to face interviews was to conduct interviews with an internet video conference site, such as Skype. However, this was not necessary since all of the participants of the study were able to meet for a face to

face interview. This was the ideal method of interview, because technology is not always predictable and physical cues from direct contact could be minimized. The alternative was proposed based on Merriam's (2009) suggestion of using "convenience sampling" when time, money, location, availability of sites and respondents is an issue, but selecting on this "basis alone is not very credible and is likely to produce information poor data" (p. 79). Merriam claims that "the more cases that are included in the study, and the greater the variation across the cases, the more compelling and interpretation is likely to be" (p. 49). The researcher considered a range of possible participants so that the precision, validity, and stability of the findings would be strengthened. Selecting participants from only one area, could potentially skew the results, therefore an attempt to obtain participants from different areas was considered in the hopes of providing a more thorough geographic representation of the State. All current 14 Mexican American superintendents were invited to participate in the study, however only seven superintendents were able to participant. Fortunately, the seven that participated did provide a thorough geographic representation of Mexican America female superintendents.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Phenomenological research provides a descriptive and detailed understanding of an experience with the aid of rich quotations from participants. This requires interviewing and observing persons with first- hand experience in the phenomenon and "capturing someone else's experience of the world in his or her own words" (Patton, 2002, p. 47). The data consists of in-depth interviews, observations, self- reflections by the researcher, and excerpts from documents. The primary sources of data come from the

interviews and observations. The researcher often precedes the interviews with self-reflective journaling to avoid embedding personal attitudes (Cresswell, 2006). Field notes are taken during the interview and the researcher's personal thoughts, feelings, and perceptions are logged. This practice is termed "memoing" by Miles and Huberman (1994). The field notes are valuable sources of information which allow the researcher to reflect back on the initial interview and observation. The researcher enters the study knowing that certain events, problems, relationships are important, and some are of little consequence. The aim of the researcher is to represent the phenomenon accurately and effectively (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The content of the study evolves during the analytical process as the essence of each participant's story is captured, and a comprehensive persona of each individual develops and is presented. The researcher remains reflective of her own perspective and voice and the focus is a balanced approach depicting "the world authentically in all its complexity while being self-analytical, politically aware, and reflexive in consciousness" (Patton, 2002, p. 41) The researcher sets the criteria for re-telling the story from each participants' point of view of the phenomenon.

### **Data Collection**

Merriam (2009) ascertains "qualitative researchers can never capture an objective truth or reality" nonetheless the use of triangulation can increase the credibility of the study (p. 215). This study used multiple methods of data collection: surveys, interviews, observations, and documents. These multiple methods of collection allowed the researcher opportunities to gather different perspectives from all participants and the

information gathered from the interviews were cross checked with observations and any documents relevant to the phenomenon. The collection of data was conducted in three phases: (1) surveys, (2) face to face interviews and observations, and (3) document review and field notes. The first phase required the researcher to contact potential participants by email and a follow up phone call that explained the importance and purpose of the study (see appendix A). A general survey was attached to the email asking for demographic information (see appendix B). The survey solicited general personal information such as ethnicity, age, marital status, and number of children. Professional experience pertaining to level of education, certifications, superintendency, and district demographic information was included in the survey.

The methodological tool preferred by many qualitative researchers is the interview (Denzin & Lincoln 1994). Face to face interviews in the natural setting provide the researcher the opportunity to capture direct quotations from the participants which uncover individual perspectives of the phenomenon. Body language cues may require deeper probing from the interviewer, thus observations of these cues require special attention during the interview. Merriam (2009) points out that “informal interviews and conversations are often interwoven with observation” (p. 117) and compares a less structured observation to that of a “television camera scanning the area” (p. 120). She recommends recording observations in the form of descriptive field notes which requires the researcher to conduct careful and systematic observations that pay close attention to the participant’s behavior and characteristics, and the setting. She suggests including reflective comments which include the observer’s hunches, initial interpretations, speculations, and reactions of the observation. Observations can yield detailed,

descriptive information about the participant (Patton 2002). This study relied heavily on an informal and in-depth face to face interviews with each participants. Merriam (2009) cites DeMarais who defines interview as “a process in which a researcher and participant engage in conversation focused on questions related to a research study” (p. 55). According to Denzin & Lincoln (1994) the “interview is a conversation, the art of asking questions and listening” (p. 353). Qualitative in-depth interviews are more like a conversation with a set of predetermined response categories created by the researcher which include systematic questioning. The researcher was interested in uncovering the participant’s personal views of the phenomenon, and allowed the participant to frame and structure their responses to each open ended question (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The researchers training as a licensed school counselor was utilized during the interview, which included active listening, analyzing body language and uncovering hidden meanings in the conversations. My experiences and practices as a school counselor allowed me to extract meaning from the interviews and analyze the participant’s verbalizations. Each interview take place at a location that was convenient for each participant and was conducted in a setting appropriate for effective interviewing. The interview guide was formatted in with open ended questions (see Appendix D). Merriam (2009) advises “good interview questions are those that are open-ended and yield descriptive data, even stories about the phenomenon” (p. 99). Throughout the interview, the researcher summarized the conversation and asked for clarification. The responses from each of the participants were digitally recorded and the participants were informed of the recording prior to the interview. The intent of the researcher during the interview

was to capture the participant's point of view, attitude, and emotions, all of which were of great value to the study.

The final phase of the data collection consisted of review of documentation, which included field notes and observation notes. As Merriam (2009) emphasizes "documents of all types can help the researcher uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem" (p. 163). The documents that were collected were public records, newspaper articles, school district newsletter, and any other documents that the researcher considered relevant to the study. The field notes consisted of the descriptive data of what I observed, this included the physical environment and the interactions among the people in the environment. The observation notes were my personal perspectives of the environment. This included my emotional reactions, questions, and thoughts. Field notes were taken before, during, and after the interview. These notes included my personal thoughts and reactions to what I had just heard and observed.

The collection of data collection included a variety of methods, interviews, observation, and review of documents. The interviewed provided rich direct quotes from each individual including their personal perceptions and experiences. The observation provided detailed descriptions of the settings and behaviors and were written in strategic field notes. Additional perceptions and excerpts were obtained through artifacts and documents. All of these methods of data collection were chosen because the researcher was interested in gathering insight, discovery, and interpretation of significant factors of the phenomenon.

## **Data Analysis**

The recorded interviews were transcribed for interpretation and analysis. This is the suggested method of database analysis by Merriam (2009). She states “ideally, verbatim transcription of interviews provides the best database for analysis” (p. 110). The interpretation of the data went beyond superficial descriptive analysis. The researcher was interested in uncovering and presenting the meaningful experiences shared by the participants and satisfied Patton’s (2002) definition of interpretation by “attaching significance to what was found, making sense of findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, considering meanings, and otherwise imposing order on an unruly but surely patterned world” (p. 480).

For this study, consideration of researcher bias was important. Interviewers’ personal experiences can shape how they interpret participant’s responses (Sprague, 2005). The researcher is a Mexican American female with 10 years of experience in educational leadership. She holds a current superintendent certification and is studying Mexican American female superintendents, which might be considered a limitation. Sprague assumes differences or similarities in gender, race, class, and other salient dimensions of social power and privilege have an impact on interactions within the context of research, and thus influence how people talk to each other and what they say to each other” (p. 124). Goffney & Edmonson (2012) make the general assertion that Caucasian Americans have studied their own race and gender without having to provide any justification. Citing Rubin and Rubin, they maintain that “many feminists claim that successful interviewing requires that there be a considerable shared culture between the interviewer and interviewee, not only should woman interview woman, but women in the

same position (p. 5). Qualitative inquiries seek honest, meaningful, credible, and empirically supported findings which require the investigator to adopt a stance of neutrality. The researcher's intent was not to present a singular perspective, the intent was to provide a rich and descriptive interpretation of the experiences of Mexican American female superintendents. The commitment was to understand the world of each superintendent as it unfolded and be true to the multiple perspectives as they emerged. "However, neutrality does not mean detachment...Qualitative inquiry depends on, uses, and enhances the researcher's direct experiences in the world and insights about those experiences" (Patton, 2002, p. 51).

The analytical process demanded a heightened awareness of the data and an openness to identify salient themes and patterns evident in the setting, expressed by the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The literature shows that women must overcome barriers when entering male dominated careers such as the superintendency. Because White males have traditionally dominated the superintendency, women entering the profession tend to encounter barriers related to the traditional sex-role stereotypes (Brunner, 1999, 2000, 2002; Blount, 1996; Grogan, 1996, 2005; & Tallerico, 2005). Mexican American women encounter barriers related to both gender and ethnicity biases. Mentorship, social-capital, and redefinition of self are some of the strategies that Mexican American females rely on when seeking the superintendency (Mendez-Morse, 1997; Ortiz, 1999, Quilantan, 2002). The review of literature discovered patterns in the selection and appointment of Mexican American female superintendents. They are typically appointed to smaller school districts whose demographics include a high percentage of Hispanic student enrollments. Mexican American female superintendents

often are selected to lead school districts that have experienced recent turmoil, such as budget restraints, high administrator turnover, and tensions among school board members (Ortiz, 1998; Couch 2007). These themes and patterns were used as building blocks for gathering new knowledge and steered the investigation which sought to give the reader a complete description on the phenomenon under study. The themes and patterns that emerged from the collected data served as a guideline for inductive analysis. Patton (2002) describes the process of inductive analysis as “discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one’s data” and deductive analysis as the process of stipulating analytical categories “according to an existing framework” (p. 458).

This inductive analysis assisted in generating new categories expressed by the participants of the study. Merriam (2009) refers to phenomenological analysis as “ferreting out the essence or basic structure” of the phenomenon with imaginative variation (p. 199). This technique attempts to “see the object of the phenomenon from several different angles or perspectives” (p. 199). Moustakas (1994) explains the task of imaginative variation is “to seek possible meanings through the utilization of imagination” and “arrive at structural descriptions of an experience and the underlying and precipitating factors that account for that experience” (pp. 97-98).

The researcher following a sequential analysis in the coding process of the data by using the seven steps formulated by Miles and Huberman (1994). Step one is to underline key terms in the text. Step two is to restate key phrases. The ideal is to remain as descriptive and literal as possible. Step three is to reduce the phrases and create clusters several times. Step four is the reduction of the cluster, and attaching labels. As the clusters are reduced in number and are combined to form meta-clusters, comparisons are

made at the boundaries of each cluster. Step five is to make generalizations about the phrases in each cluster. These correspond to the propositions. Step six is to generate mini-theories: memo writings that pose explanations. Step seven is to integrate these theories in an explanatory framework (pp. 87-88). This seven step model provided a guideline for making sense of the data, which was intended to convey an understanding of the phenomenon by relating a holistic description and an intensive analysis of each participant.

Merriam (2009) recommends that all the material from the study, interview transcripts, field notes, documents, and researchers reflective memos, be brought together in an organized fashion for easy retrieval. Patton (2002) considers the database to include all the voluminous major information from the study that has been edited, sorted out and organized by the researcher either chronologically or topically so that the researcher can locate specific data during intensive analysis. The collection of data provided the necessary material needed for the detailed report.

Polkinghorne (1989) says that it is essential that a report “give an accurate, clear, and articulated description of an experience” and the reader should understand better what it is like to experience the phenomenon (p. 46). Merriam (2009) advises that a detailed description of all the particulars of the case be included, so the reader can assess the evidence and experience the setting. The researcher’s personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions were distinguished by bracketing. This “*epoche*” was an ongoing process throughout the analysis and reporting of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 2009). The researcher followed Moustakas’ structured approach for analysis; (1) horizontalizing individual statements; (2) creating meaning units; (3) clustering

themes; (4) advancing textural and structural descriptions, and (5) presenting integration of textural and structural descriptions into a clearly articulated report of the essence of each experience (Creswell, 1998, p. 174). This approach provided a guide for creating a descriptive narrative of the phenomenon, where the goal of the researcher was to convey an absolute understanding of the each participant's experience. The researcher intended to render the accounts and experiences of the participants as fully and as faithfully as possible. The researcher understands that the report intersects with the inquirer's perspective and the audience for the report. Patton (2002) reminds us "people viewing qualitative findings through different paradigmatic lenses will react differently, just as researchers, vary in how we think about what we do when we study the world" (p. 543). Thus, the rendition of what was learned from the each case narrative is the interpretation of the researcher's analysis of data.

### **Trustworthiness**

There are several methods that the researcher used during the analysis of the study to ensure trustworthiness and ethical considerations. First the researcher applied the qualitative research practice of stating any biases and assumptions surrounding the research topic and participants. The researcher continued to examine these biases during the data collection and data analysis process. Denzin (2009) insists that "stories can always be told in different ways" and "all texts are biased productions" (p. 99). The practicality is that there cannot be a permanent telling of the story. There will always be different versions of the story, even when the same site is studied by others (Denzin, 2009). Second, the researcher applied a variety of strategies to establish credibility. The researcher used a variety of strategies that are suggested by Marshall and Rossman

(2006) for limiting bias interpretation. These strategies included: conducting cross-checking and peer debriefing, creating explicitly descriptive and non-evaluative note taking (field notes), and maintaining a thorough audit trail of the collected data. The ongoing cross-checking occurred throughout the analysis which included a complete understanding of individual perceptions by assuring that the answers to the questions were accurate. This was accomplished by getting complete explanations from each participant about their answers to each interview question and receiving feedback on emerging findings. Merriam (2009) refers to this strategy as “respondent validation” or “member checks”. This type of strategy involves going back to some of the participants and with preliminary findings and asking them whether the interpretation “rings true” to their experience (p. 217). Peer debriefing occurred with the support of the Dissertation Committee Chair and Co-Chair and sustained consistency and neutrality. The highly descriptive field notes were preserved in a systematic and organized approach. The notes included detailed descriptions of the setting and participants, the essence of what each participant said, and the observer’s reflective comments. The practice of “bracketing” was used throughout the process of data analysis. The direct quotations from each participant were captured in the audio –recordings and were transcribed and placed in individual participant folders. These strategies allowed the researcher to remain faithful to what emerged from the data and which provided a rich thick description and holistic portraiture of the each participants’ own experiences and perspectives of the phenomenon. In addition, the researcher triangulated the data by conducting observations and collecting documents and artifacts that corroborated, elaborated, and validated the study. Marshall and Rossman (2006) stipulate that “triangulation is not so much about

getting “truth” but rather about finding multiple perspectives” (p. 204). These methods promoted an extensive and comprehensive examination of the data which replicated the essential meanings and themes of the women’s experiences in the superintendency.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the researcher discussed her choice of research design as a qualitative method, utilizing phenomenological research methods. The purposeful selection of participants was presented along with the methods and strategies for data collection and analysis, which included compiling surveys, conducting interviews, making observations, and gathering artifacts and documents. Procedures for analyzing the data were explained. Measures to limit researcher bias were applied to meet the requirements of trustworthiness and ethical considerations. The researcher articulated a proposed plan, prior to collecting the data that established a strategic approach for meeting the conventional positivist paradigm of internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This plan addressed the alternative constructs which reflect the assumptions of qualitative research; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The purpose of the study was to examine the experiences of Mexican American female superintendents as they lead public school districts in Texas. Their stories will offer different perspectives of the superintendency with the potential of shaping important implications for superintendent preparation programs. Most importantly, this study will narrate the voices of a marginalized group which continues to go unnoticed in current literature. It will provide the opportunity to learn from the experiences of these

unique women who have the capability of offering significant contributions in the field of educational leadership.

## **IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative investigation was to capture the essence of personal experiences of Mexican American female superintendents in Texas. The search for the essence of an experience is the foundation of phenomenological inquiry established by the originator of phenomenology Edmund Husserl (Creswell, 2006). The research question guiding this study was “what have been the experiences of Mexican American women while seeking, and operating within, the superintendency?” The research data collected for this study included demographic surveys, face to face interviews and observations, field notes and reflective journaling by the researcher. Each interview was conducted using a semi-structured format, at a location designated by each participant. These face to face interviews were the most valuable pieces of data collected. This approach enabled each participant to provide a narrative of their ascension into the superintendency. Each interview was recorded and transcribed for interpretation and analysis, the suggested method of data analysis recommended by Merriam (2009), who stated “ideally, verbatim transcription of interviews provides the best database for analysis” (p. 110). My goal for this investigation was to uncover and present meaningful, common experiences, shared by each participant. Patton (2002) defines interpretation of the data as “attaching significance to what was found, making sense of findings, offering explanations, drawing conclusions, extrapolating lessons, making inferences, considering meanings, and otherwise imposing order on an unruly but surely patterned world” (p. 480).

The first section of this chapter presents the context of the study through a brief descriptive analysis of Mexican American female superintendents in Texas. The chapter continues with individual case stories about the seven superintendents who participated in the study. The narrative of each case portrays the personal journey of Mexican American women as they ascend into the superintendency. The interpretation of each case study includes quotes and restated phrases that were spoken by each participant. This design is recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) who advise qualitative researchers to generate mini-theories in an explanatory framework that conveys a holistic description of each participant.

The next section reports the results of the study. The data analysis revealed similar experiences among the women. The salient themes and patterns that emerged from the collected data served as a guideline for inductive analysis. Patton (2002) describes the process of inductive analysis as “discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one’s data” (p. 458). The analytical process involved a pragmatic attentiveness to the data and incorporated Marshall & Rossman’s (2006) advice of maintaining openness in identifying salient themes and patterns that become evident in the setting and are expressed by the participants. The prominent themes which emerged from the data analysis were, include racism, cultural congruency, gender stereotypes, district appeal, and school board politics. The final analysis of data also uncovered patterns within each prominent theme that was related to personal attributes that each of the participants shared. The common attributes were self-efficacy and confidence, risk taking traits, and determination and perseverance.

The final analysis of the data revealed some encouraging results which differed from the earlier literature reported by Couch (2007) and Mendez-Morse (1997). Each participant in this study conveyed that they did not encounter the customary, expected barriers that have been connected to gender and race while pursuing the superintendency. However, each of the participants in this study described encounters with customary racism and ethnicity preconceptions at some point in their lives either in their formative years and/or during their educational careers. These women were successful in eluding these common barriers with extensive support systems, which included family, mentorship and/or sponsorships, social capital, and perseverance. They credited their accomplishments to intrinsic motivation, expertise and skills, and an extensive support system. These skills which are essential for the superintendency are fundamentally the same for all individuals, regardless of their gender or race. Typically, one develops the necessary skills and expertise for the superintendency by moving up the career ladder within the educational organization. As an observer, I was inspired by the testimony of these participants as they recounted the events that lead to their successful attainment of the superintendency. While evaluating the data, I also remained cognizant of researcher bias and ethical considerations.

The following section depicts the context of the study and presents distinct patterns in location and types of school districts that Mexican American female superintendents lead. The final portion of this chapter introduces the voices of a small group of Mexican American female superintendents. Their stories, along with my findings reveal similar experiences among the women. Their individual voices and unique stories provide educational leadership programs the opportunity to learn from

their experiences. These are extraordinary women who have successfully navigated a career path atypical for women, a path which historically “has been defined and institutionalized as men’s work” (Tallerico and Blount, 2004, p. 642). Their accounts of meaningful events signify their substantial contributions as educational leaders and their capacity to serve as role models for other women who aspire to become superintendents.

### **Context of the Study**

During the time of this study 14 Mexican American women were superintendents in Texas. All 14 superintendents were invited to participate; seven agreed to contribute to the research. I was intrigued with the immediate response to the invitation from a majority of the superintendents. The seven participants who responded favorably to the request were eager to contribute to the investigation. Each one indicated that they were not aware that there were so few Mexican American female superintendents in the State. Three of the 14 superintendents implied that they were interested in participating in the study, but because of their unyielding work agendas they were unable to allocate time to share in the inquiry. Only one of the 14 superintendents informed me that she did not wish to join in the study and the remaining three did not respond to the numerous attempts for contact by the researcher.

The participants of the study shared a number of common characteristics. They were Mexican American women serving as the district leader in a public school district with a predominately Hispanic student enrollment. When asked to identify themselves as either Latino or Hispanic, they all chose Hispanic. Each woman had over 20 years of experience in public education. They differed in the number of superintendencies they had held, the total years of practice as a superintendent, and the levels of education they

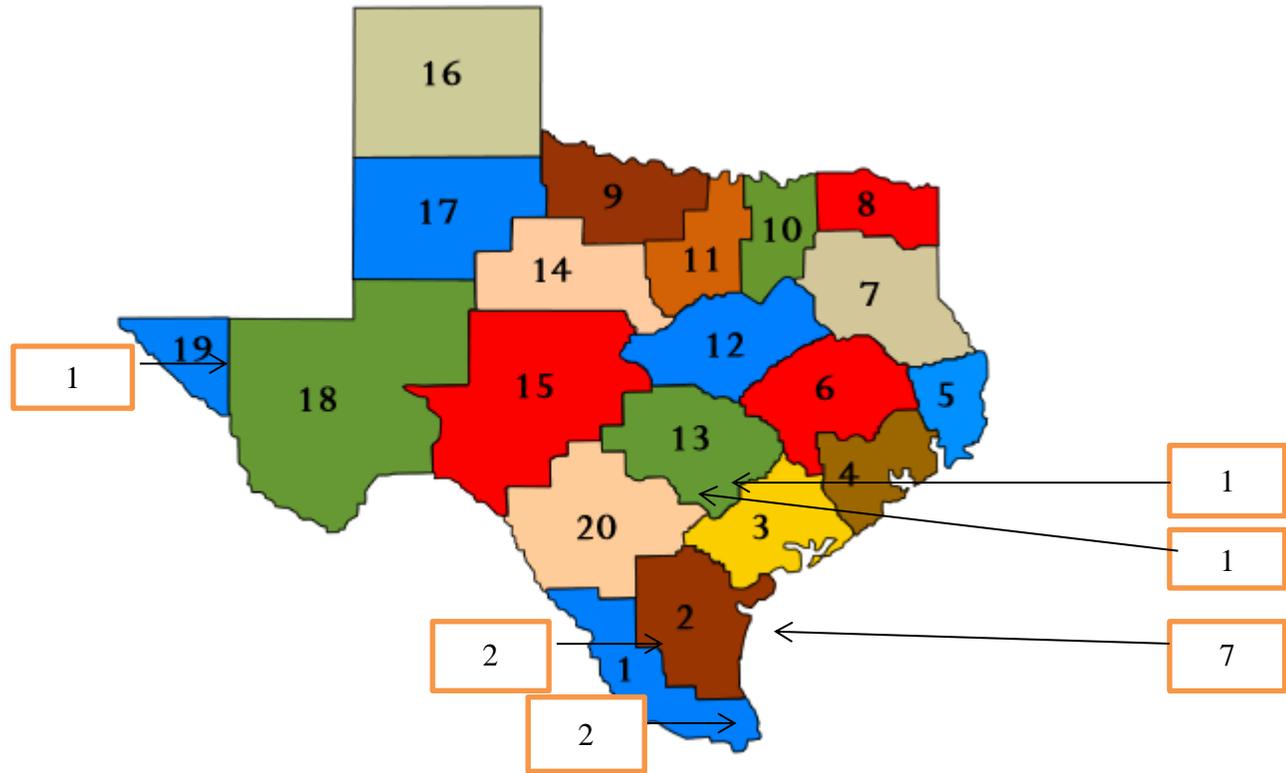
had attained. Four of the women had earned their doctoral degrees. One of participants was in her first year as a superintendent and was the only woman that was not married or had children. Three of the participants had over 10 years of experience in the superintendency and the remaining three ranged from two to five years of experience.

### **Location of Mexican American Female Superintendents**

There are distinct patterns in the location and types of school districts that Mexican American female superintendents are being selected to lead. The majority of Mexican American female superintendents are located in a specific area of the state (see Figure 1). This finding was pertinent to results of the study because according to the 2013 United States Census Bureau report the demographics of this area of this State has a majority Hispanic population.

Texas school districts are divided into 20 educational service centers according to regional location (see Appendix). All seven participants are located in the central-southern area of the state. In addition, five of the seven Mexican American female superintendents who did not participate in the study are also located in this same geographical area, and two of the seven are located in the far western portion of the state near the Texas/Mexico border. Four of the participants were located in surrounding area school districts which had more Mexican American female superintendents than any other part of the state. This region encompasses school districts bordering a coastal city whose county has a majority Hispanic population, 61.5%. (United States Census Bureau, 2013)

## Locations of Mexican American Female Superintendents



**Number of Mexican American Female Superintendents in Each Regions**

Superintendents	Region 1	Region 2	Region 13	Region 19	Region 20
<b>Participants</b>	1	4	1	0	1
<b>Non-Participants</b>	3	3	0	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>

*Figure 1.* Location of Mexican American Female Superintendents by Regional Educational Service Center. Adapted from retrieval of [http://www.tea.state.tx.us/regional\\_services/esc/](http://www.tea.state.tx.us/regional_services/esc/)

**School district demographics.** All seven superintendents lead school districts that have a majority Hispanic student population (Table 2). There were no Mexican American female superintendents in school districts that had larger percentages of White student enrollment or school districts that had higher percentages of students from higher social economic status. It is important to note that none of the participants in the study applied with these types of school districts and did not seek out the superintendent position with communities that differed from their cultural backgrounds. The types of school districts in which the Mexican American superintendents were located did not differ from previous studies (Couch, 2007; Ortiz, 1998). They all were selected to lead school districts that had undergone turmoil, experienced tension among board members, had low student performance that had resulted in local, state, and federal agency violations, and/or had high administrator turnover. Nonetheless, each superintendent from this study stated that they purposely sought out these types of school districts. They expressed their interest in working at a school district that had a history of low academic test scores and a majority of Hispanic student enrollment. These types of school district appealed to them because they wanted to “make a difference” and they embraced the “challenge.” For some, they chose to return to their home town to “give back” to their community and improve the quality of education for the children of their community because of the educational injustices they had experienced. Isabel said,

I decided to go back to the high school I came from because I really wanted to make a difference...when I went to college I had a rude awaking thinking I was prepared, but I really wasn't prepared. So I wanted to go back.

Rachel said, “I came back to the community where I grew up in, because I really wanted to make a difference in my community.”

Table 1  
School District Demographics

<b>Superintendent</b>	<b>Student Enrollment</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Percentage of Students Receiving Free &amp; Reduced Lunches</b>	<b>2012 Adequate Yearly Progress</b>
Estrella Mendez-Adams	2,200	Hispanic 92.63% Anglo 6.48% Other <1%	82%	Missed Reading Math Stage 3
Rita Chavez	371	Hispanic 93.5% Anglo 6.2% Other <1 %	62.8%	Missed Reading Math
Catherine Garcia	1,300	Hispanic 77.9% Anglo 18.4% African American 1.6% Other < 1%	56.4%	Missed Math
Isabel Salinas	2,100	Hispanic 86.4% Anglo 1.6% African American 11.8% Other <1%	88.2%	Missed Reading Math Stage 3
Irma Gonzales	7,391	Hispanic 65.95% Anglo 26.7% African American 5.7% Other <1%	68.4%	Missed Reading Math Stage 3
Gabriella Evans	5,479	Hispanic 93.4% Anglo 5.6% Other <1%	77.8%	Missed Reading Math Stage 2
Rachel Robertson	10,000	Hispanic 97.1% Anglo 1.6% Other < 1%	85%	Missed Math Stage 3

**School district size.** The size of school districts to which the participants were appointed varied. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) groups school district size into nine categories based on the number of total students enrolled in the district. The nine categories defined by TEA are: (a) 50,000 and over, (b) 25, 000 – 49,999, (c) 10,000-24,999, (d) 5,000 – 9,999, (e) 3,000 – 4,999, (f) 1,600 – 2,999, (g) 1,000 – 1,599, (h) 500 – 999, and (i) under 500. All seven participants were serving in school districts that had a total student enrollment of 10,000 or less. Three of the women were serving in school districts where the student enrollment ranged from 5,000 - 10,000. Three of the women were located in a school district where the student enrollment ranged from, 1,000 - 2,200 and one of the women served a school district with the smallest student enrollment of 371. All seven Mexican American female superintendents were serving in the smaller school districts located in the southern central region of the state.

The types of schools districts that the participants lead also varied. TEA further classifies Texas public school districts into eight categories based on the type of community in which the district is located. Factors such as district size, growth rates, and proximity to urban areas are used to determine the appropriate category. The eight community types are: (a) major urban, (b) major suburban, (c) other central city, (d) other central city suburban, (e) independent town, (f) non-metropolitanfast growing, (g) non-metropolitanstable, and (h) rural. One participant served in a major suburban school district. Two of the superintendents were serving in other central city suburban school districts. One was in an independent town school district. Two were located in a non-metropolitan stable school district and one was in a rural school district (Table 5). There

were no Mexican American female superintendents in the larger metropolitan school districts.

Table 2  
Community Type and School District Size of Superintendents

School District Size	Over	50,000	25,000-	49,999	10,000-24,999	5,000 –	9,999	3,000-	4,999	1,600-	2,999	1,000-	1,599	500 –	999	Under	500
	Community Type																
Major Urban																	
Major Suburban					1												
Other Central City																	
Other Central City Suburban											2						
Independent Town											1						
Non- Metropolitan: Fast Growing																	
Non- Metropolitan: Stable											2						
Rural																	1
<b>Total</b>					<b>1</b>						<b>5</b>						<b>1</b>

### Glossary

*Major Urban* (11 districts). A district is classified as major urban if: (a) it is located in a county with a population of at least 840,000; (b) its enrollment is the largest in the county or at least 75 percent of the largest district enrollment in the county; and (c) at least 35 percent of enrolled students are economically disadvantaged.

*Major Suburban* (80 districts). A district is classified as major suburban if: (a) it does not meet the criteria for classification as major urban; (b) it is contiguous to a major urban district; and (c) its enrollment is at least 3 percent that of the contiguous major urban district or at least 4,500 students. A district also is classified as major suburban if: (a) it does not meet the criteria for classification as major urban; (b) it is not contiguous to a major urban district; (c) it is located in the same county as a major urban district; and (d) its enrollment is at least 15 percent that of the nearest major urban district in the county or at least 4,500 students.

*Other Central City* (41 districts). A district is classified as other central city if: (a) it does not meet the criteria for classification in either of the previous subcategories; (b) it is not contiguous to a major urban district; (c) it is located in a county with a population of between 100,000 and 839,999; and (d) its enrollment is the largest in the county or at least 75 percent of the largest district enrollment in the county.

*Other Central City Suburban* (165 districts). A district is classified as other central city suburban if: (a) it does not meet the criteria for classification in any of the previous subcategories; (b) it is located in a county with a population of between 100,000 and 839,999; and (c) its enrollment is at least 15 percent of the largest district enrollment in the county. A district also is other central city suburban if: (a) it does not meet the criteria for classification in any of the previous subcategories; (b) it is contiguous to another central city district; (c) its enrollment is greater than 3 percent that of the contiguous other central city district; and (d) its enrollment exceeds the median district enrollment of 817 students for the state.

*Independent Town* (70 districts). A district is classified as independent town if: (a) it does not meet the criteria for classification in any of the previous subcategories; (b) it is located in a county with a population of 25,000 to 99,999; and (c) its enrollment is the largest in the county or greater than 75 percent of the largest district enrollment in the county.

*Non-Metropolitan: Fast Growing* (32 districts). A district is classified as non-metropolitan: fast growing if: (a) it does not meet the criteria for classification in any of the previous subcategories; (b) it has an enrollment of at least 300 students; and (c) its enrollment has increased by at least 20 percent over the past five years.

*Non-Metropolitan: Stable* (182 districts). A district is classified as non-metropolitan: stable if: (a) it does not meet the criteria for classification in any of the previous subcategories; and (b) its enrollment exceeds the median district enrollment for the state.

*Rural* (445 districts). A district is classified as rural if it does not meet the criteria for classification in any of the previous subcategories. A rural district has either: (a) an enrollment of between 300 and the median district enrollment for the state and an enrollment growth rate over the past five years of less than 20 percent; or (b) an enrollment of less than 300 students.

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Source: Division of Research and Analysis, Accountability Research Unit, TEA, retrieved <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/acctres/analyze/years.html>

## Case Narratives

The next section portrays the individual case narratives of the seven participants. The following pseudo names were created for each participant; Estrella Mendez-Adams, Catherine Garcia, Isabel Salinas, Irma Gonzales, Gabriella Evans, and Rachel Robertson

### **Estrella Mendez-Adams**

Estrella Mendez-Adams is the superintendent of a rural school district located approximately 45 miles south of a large metropolitan city. On the demographic survey Ms. Mendez-Adams stated that the student enrollment was 2, 220 with a large percentage of Hispanic students (92.63%). At the time of the interview, Mrs. Mendez-Adams was beginning her 3<sup>rd</sup> year with this school district, which was her second superintendency. She had a total of four years of experience as a superintendent and had earned her doctoral degree. She was married for a second time, had two adult children and had just become a grandmother two days prior to the interview.

Estrella was born in Acuña Mexico. She came to the United States in 1972 when she was 15 years old. She was sent to the United States by her parents to live with her older brother, who was living near San Francisco, California. She attended high school in California for one year, then moved to Texas and graduated from high school in 1976. She stated that she was disappointed with the type of education she received in both California and Texas. She explained that during her high school years, ESL and bilingual classes were going through some radical changes as a result of the Lau vs. Nichols case. This case was brought forward by non-English speaking students who claimed they were not being provided with equal educational opportunities by the San Francisco Unified School District because they were not given linguistically appropriate accommodations.

The case was reviewed by the U.S Supreme Court which ruled in favor of the students. The Court's ruling required schools to provide accommodations to all limited English proficient students, and initiated the addition of certified bilingual teachers (Brown, 2010). As a result of the Court's ruling the State of Texas encountered a shortage of qualified ESL and bilingual teachers. Estrella explains that this case occurred while she was attending high school in Texas. She said that she was placed in total English immersion classes and was disappointed with the quality of education she received. This became her motivation for pursuing a career in bilingual education.

I had been in Mexico and I was already taking physics and chemistry and then I go to California, right after the Lau vs. Nichols case, everyone was scrambling for bilingual teachers, so they place me in total English immersion classes and they have me reading pre-primers...from California I came to Abilene, Texas as a teenager, I was a little upset, but that was when I was determined that I was going to be an educator and I became a bilingual teacher.

Estrella taught for nine years in Big Spring, Texas and began her administrative career there. She was promoted quickly. Her first administrative position was as an Elementary School Principal for merely one summer; she quickly advanced to district level administration. She was appointed as the Director of Federal Programs and Curriculum and served in that capacity for two and half years. She then was promoted to Assistant Superintendent for Personnel and Instruction. She was the first female and Hispanic to be appointed to in this role.

I was promoted very quickly because I'm a very focused person...I became the first female and the first Hispanic Associate Superintendent in the history of the

district, so not long ago, I was a trail blazer, back then we still faced a-lot of hard issues of being a female and being a Hispanic.

Her role as the Assistant Superintendent created an uproar in the community.

Estrella shares that during her time in this West Texas school district she faced and endured racial discrimination from the public. She received hate mail from individual community members and threats were made to the school board that was comprised of mostly White men. These vivid illustration of the injustice that students of the community had also faced. Estrella prevailed over the prejudicial and alarming comments that had been made by a small group of intolerant community members. Throughout this ordeal, she remained focused on her vision for the district. Her testimony reveals traits of self-efficacy and confidence. These aptitudes assisted her to block out barriers associated with racial biases which could have thwarted her from pursuing the superintendency.

It was somewhat painful, shortly after I was named Director of Federal Programs and Curriculum I began to receive hate mail and then we had a bomb threat in one of the board meetings...I remember this vividly, the board members all had an envelope and then one of them told me I have to show you this during the break, the letter said if you do not get rid of the Mexican we will get rid you. I looked at all my principals who were staring at me, then I told the Board President you are not telling me anything new, anything I do not know, I know who I am, that's irrelevant to me. You can be voted out and I am Mexican, that's all there is to it. I was able to get past that. I knew that there were people like that in the town, but it shocked me that here we are in 2000 and they are still doing that.

Despite this disturbing encounter, Estrella remained determined in cultivating a school district that would no longer separate students based on prejudice. She began to grasp her potential as a district leader and viewed the superintendency as an opportunity to improve the education for disadvantaged students. She had forceful sponsorship from her school board members and superintendent, who were willing to resist the traditional biases and recognized her potential as a school leader.

Before I knew it, no one was paying attention to who I was, we were going towards a direction to make things happen... We were able to recruit a number Hispanic administrators and teachers... we able to clear our 20 year old segregation law suit... those experiences added to me wanting to be a leader... it was about what I could do for children and families. <sup>1</sup>

Estrella explains that she when she became interested in applying for the Assistant Superintendent position she sought advice from others. One person that she sought out was a Mexican American female who had recently obtained her first superintendent position.<sup>2</sup> Estrella considered her as a friend and a colleague. She described themselves as the “lone rangers in West Texas”. Another individual from whom she sought guidance from was a mentor who had been appointed to her during her superintendent certification courses. Her mentor, who was a White female, cautioned Estrella that seeking a highly visible position within a community that was not accustomed to having Hispanics or

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<sup>1</sup> It was common practice for Texas schools to have various forms of “de factor segregation of schools”. One form was separating Mexican American children because of language. This was referred to as “pedagogical wisdom” by educators, which was a method of justifying the segregation of students (Montoya, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> The Mexican American female superintendent that mentored Estrella as she moved up the career ladder has remained in the superintendency and also participated in this study.

females in such roles could be challenging. This did not discourage Estrella from pursuing her aspirations.

I told her, I need your expertise, I told her help me wrap my brain around this, because I want to know how to do it. She said it is going to be tough because the community has never seen someone like you do this and she brought up some very good points and I took her advice.

Estrella expressed her gratitude for the mentoring she received from her Superintendent, who was a White male. She refers to him as a “visionary”. Historically, the district had always had a White male in both the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent positions. This was the first time a Hispanic or female was being considered for the Assistant Superintendent position. Estrella mentioned that her supervisor was aware that his selection of a Mexican American female for the Assistant Superintendent position would be controversial, but he was willing to accept any criticism for his selection and he had faith in Estrella’s capabilities.

My supervisor knew my work and there was some tough competition, I knew when my supervisor told me you know this is going to be an uphill battle, I knew what he was talking about, you know that this is going to be my *swan song*, because, I am going to be finished here once I name you the Assistant Superintendent and he was right, after that, the board was after him and they were relentless and they got him out...He was a visionary person.

The challenges that Estrella overcame early in her career at a historically segregated West Texas school district strengthened her resiliency and added to her self-efficacy. Her intrinsic motivation and recognition of her abilities as a district leader

became evident throughout the analysis of the data. She demonstrated an inclination to take risks in seeking the superintendency. She sought school districts which had not been able to improve student performance on state assessments. She successfully obtained the position she desired and stood confident in her skills. She acknowledges that she had an extensive support system in place and stresses that she is willing to seek advice from others whom she regards as experts in the field.

I found one troubled district and I prepared myself. I asked some of my colleagues, OK, how do you get ready for this? I use a-lot or common sense in everything. So, I applied for one superintendency, I applied, I interviewed, I got it and it was my 1st superintendency. I have people I relied on, I picked up the phone and I am not embarrassed to ask questions, that's how I learned.

Estrella was at her first superintendency for only one year, at a school district located in South Texas with a predominately Hispanic student population. She claimed that they were able to improve student performance during that year. “In one year we turned it around, they were academically unacceptable, everything was already in place, so I just tweaked a few things, and we were able to turn it around.” It is important to note that turning a school district around in only one year is highly improbable. However, I found Estrella’s narrative of her experience with this school district credible, eventhough, I do not have substantial accountability data from that school district during that time frame which may well validate her story.

While beginning her new position as a superintendent Estrella was accepted into the Educational Leadership doctoral program at the University of Texas. Her district school board members supported her quest for a doctoral degree and agreed to a modified

work schedule so she could attend classes. She began to attend classes during the summer session, while still employed. She realized that she could not do justice to both. She eventually chose to resign from her superintendent position so she could participate in the doctoral program full time. "I just couldn't do justice to the program nor the district, even though my contract was renewed for 3 years, so, I decided I wanted to do the doctoral program full time". She earned her doctoral degree and moved to California where she worked as a consultant doing organizational assessments of urban schools for a non-profit agency. She worked for the non-profit organization for four years, then returned to Texas. She began to search for her second superintendency. Her interest was to continue to work for a school district with a large Hispanic enrollment. She found several school districts that she was interested in and applied. She received invitations to interview from two school districts. She was able to choose and accept a superintendent position with the school district which she found most appealing.

I was really hungry for a district...I saw a couple of districts...I saw one and applied and they offered me the job, but before I could seal the deal. I said I have to live in the district and there's nothing, there's no housing there...so I declined it and then I saw (P)... I interviewed and they were gracious enough to offer me the job and here I am. I love what I am doing!

Because Estrella was going to have to relocate to a new community, she chose to turn down one offer for a superintendent position in a small community that lacked what she considered adequate housing. She fortunate to be offered another superintendent position with a different school district that was willing to provide her with housing accommodations as part of her compensation package. This demonstrates the willingness

and flexibility to take a risk by turning down one job offer with the anticipation that a better offer will become available. Estrella had reached her goal of becoming a superintendent with a school district where she could continue to improve the education for disadvantaged students. She has demonstrated that she is a strong district leader and she continued to be true to her vision.

### **Rita Chavez**

Rita Chavez is the superintendent of a rural school district near the Texas and Mexico border. The demographic survey that was completed by Ms. Chavez indicates that the school district has a small student enrollment of 350 students with a majority Hispanic student population of 93.4%. Rita has over 30 years of experience in public education. This is her first superintendency. At the time of the interview, she was beginning her 3<sup>rd</sup> year as the superintendent of schools. She is married with an adult son who lives outside the home. Rita has earned her doctorate degree.

Throughout the interview Rita blended English and Spanish in her responses to my questions. She was very comfortable using both languages. During the interview, I was not aware that this was occurring, it was not until I listened to the recorded interview that I became aware of the continual code switching. I was intrigued with how her form of communication differentiated her from the other participants, who were also bilingual Spanish speakers. This type of communication is characteristic of the area where Rita grew up and now works. It is common for Spanish speakers to switch between both languages. Anzaldua (1987) validated this form of communication by stating “the switching of codes from English to Castilian Spanish to the North Mexican dialect to Tex-Mex...reflects my language...the language of the Borderlands” (p. in preface). The

communication style that Rita articulated is indicative of both her persona and her background. Rita's manner of dialog and expression mirrored Anzaldua's (1987) statement of "often it is only with another Chicana Tejana that I can speak freely" (p. 57). It is important to note that when Rita spoke, she switched back and forth from English to Spanish in the same sentence. It was problematic trying to capture the true essence of her voice when it was translated into English. As a Spanish speaker myself, I am able to grasp the spirit in her voice, unfortunately the ambiance that is associated with common Spanish phrases is lost in the English translation because often there is not an accurate English word that captures the true Spanish meaning. It is common for Spanish speakers who have assimilated into the American culture, such as 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, or 4<sup>th</sup> generation Mexican Americans to use a combination of English and Spanish words in a variety of contexts. Switching back and forth between the two languages in the same sentence is characteristic for individuals who grew up in Texas-Mexico border towns.

Rita is an only child and was raised by her grandparents in a small town located on the Texas and Mexican border. Her grandparents were born in Mexico, and worked hard to become United States citizens. As her elderly grandparents' health weakened, Rita became the primary caregiver. As the only grandchild, Rita felt responsible for the care of her grandparents as they aged. As a result of illness, Rita's grandmother had to have her legs amputated, which was difficult for the family. Her grandfather was also very ill during this time and could not assist with the care of her grandmother. Rita's grandfather died at the age of 97 and her grandmother died at the age of 93. She shares how having to care for her ailing grandparents impacted her decisions for advancing her

education. Rita recounts an interesting story that was told to her by her grandfather, when she was a young girl.

My grandfather was born and raised in Palacio, Durango, and lived at the time when Pancho Villa would arrive at this ranch, and they would arrive to their ranch, and they would take out the *castanas* [chest], this huge oak chest, they had holes in them, and in each *poniyan las hermanas* [would put the sisters], and they would leave them in there and locked them up, because the men would abuse them, can you believe that, they knew the family was safe, because Pancho Villa would stay with the family, but the family was not safe, colorful huh, am I boring you to death.

I was fortunate that she shared this story with me. This helped me understand her grandparents' upbringing and what they must have endured to remain in the United States. I was able to visualize the challenges of those times and how this must have impacted her grandparents' quest for a better life. Her grandparents were very supportive of Rita's profession and she shares that her grandmother was her inspiration for furthering her education "my grandmother would always say *el educacion nayden de lo va quitar* [no one can take away your education]. Rita credits her grandfather for her visionary goals.

He would always tell me to get an education and in his own way he would talk to me about vision and he would say walk to the corner, there is a street light climb the pole, get up there see what is coming for us, then make a decision that was his way of talking about vision, now we all have it as vision.

In 1989 Rita had obtained her superintendent certification which was early in her career. She had moved back to live with her grandparents after divorcing from her first husband. She shares that at that time she regretted being married.

I got married, *este* being the Latina, I was married for two weeks, I said oh my God this is nuts, this is not what I signed up for, after three years, I went back home to live with my grandparents, I felt so guilty, so terrible for having gotten married and leaving my grandparents alone, they really were not alone, they were like half a mile away but it's the Latina in you, so I got my stuff and I left and went back home.

She was an elementary principal when she went to go get her superintendent certification and her reason for continuing her education was unusual.

I was going to school, I had two masters' the only reason I was doing it, was because my life it was too much, I had to take care of my work, my son, my grandparents. I needed to get out and my grandmother did not like for me to date, to go out, because I was divorced...The only way I could get out of the house was to go to school, *ya era viejota*, [I was already old]...I drove twice a week after work to Kingsville...It was my outlet, my social life.

The majority of Rita's professional career was at a school district located close to the Texas and Mexico border. She worked for the school district for 30 years. She began her career as a Teacher's Aide and worked hard to move up the career ladder. While working fulltime, she continued to attend college classes and eventually earned her doctorate degree.

I was struggling because I took care of my grandparents, I was divorced, I had two jobs, I had a son, at night I would teach... On the weekends, I would teach... I mean, I was working where ever I could, but, I was blessed, I was fortunate that I went from the bottom all the way to the top.

Eventually, she was promoted from teacher to administrator. She held a variety of positions which included, High School Special Education Teacher, Special Education Counselor, Regular Education Counselor, Elementary Assistant Principal, Elementary Principal, Middle School Principal, and High School Principal. Rita gradually moved up the career ladder within the same school district and her final administrative position was at the district level as the Assistant of Administration. The school district did not have an Assistant Superintendent position; however, Rita's duties as the Assistant of Administration were equivalent to the Assistant Superintendent's role. Rita reached what she thought at the time would be the end of her educational career and decided to retire. She did not intend to seek a superintendent position.

What happened was that I retired from Laredo ISD with my Ph.D., because I was not feeling well, I just was not feeling well and I retired in the middle of the school year, also there was a lot of political turmoil, the board had switched alliances, they had changed, the people of power had shifted, I was one of the few left from the original regime. I was never a political person, but then you get dragged into it, you really do... So, I retired not because I was afraid or pushed out, no, I just was not feeling well... I used to think it was all in my mind because when you are working as hard as you are... there is no balance in your life, you totally ignore yourself and your family.

The circumstances in which Rita attained the superintendency were peculiar. She had not planned on pursuing a position as a superintendent. Immediately after retiring, she encountered health problems. Her medical treatment required three surgeries, all of which were conducted within a three month period. After recovering from her final surgery, her husband encouraged her to take some personal time for herself. She went to Europe and stayed for one year. While in Europe, her husband called her to inform her that a High School Principal position had been posted with a school district near their home in South Texas. She decided to apply. She applied on line, interviewed for the position over the phone and was selected for the position. She was offered the job as a retire-rehire, so she accepted it. She came back to the United States and began her new job as a High School Principal in October. Surprisingly, shortly after starting this new job, an unexpected opportunity presented itself.

I wasn't seeking the superintendency, I was very happy, I enjoyed my new position...I was living alone...My husband was going to move up with me in May...I had my own house, *este* I was working as long as I wanted to, I was loving it...Two months after I started working my husband calls me like seven times. I am in a meeting and I can't get out, so finally I call him back *¿que paso?* [what's wrong] and he says, um there is a private investigator looking for you, I said *¿que?* [what]? He says, yes, someone hired a private investigator to look for you and they want to offer you a job... It was the board president and his wife. It is a small town...*pueblo chico y pierno grande* [small town and big men]. They were going to oust the current superintendent who had been there for more than

20 years, they had heard of me and they were impressed with me and they wanted me to be the superintendent.

Through this process, Rita was invited to the home of a married couple who, oddly enough, were both members of the District's School Board. She was intrigued with their invitation, so she accepted the invitation and took her husband and son with her.

They called me because they wanted to meet me. They had never seen me before, so they called me and said we would like to meet you, we would like to meet your family, it was two board members, husband and wife... This is not even the interview, they wanted to see who I was. They sized me up. They were sizing me up, that was what they were doing, and I was too eager, deep down in my heart I knew what they were doing, but I was too eager.

Rita had not planned on applying for a superintendent position but when the opportunity presented itself, she seized it. After meeting with the husband and wife district school board team at their home; the couple encouraged her to continue with the application process for the School District's superintendent posting. She was impressed with the school board members and chose to pursue the position.

I liked them and they liked me, a month later they posted the position and they called me. Are you going to apply, you're seriously being considered for the position? So I knew what that meant. That I was going to get the position. So, I did apply and I got it.

After completing the interview process, which included interviews with all seven School Board Members, she was selected for the position. She accepted what she considered to be a generous offer and an opportunity that she could not pass up.

Here you are retired, you go back in the trenches as a High School Principal and out of no-where they offer you this job. They are offering me more money...I mean they pay me a lot of money for the amount of students, so I said "hell yeah, not only yeah, but hell yes"...*pos, no soy donta* [well, I am not dumb]...It is an amazing deal that I got, but, I had to pay, I had to pay for it with my decisions and I did.

Conversely, Rita stressed that this had been a difficult turn of events for her. The role of the job soon generated some apprehensiveness on her part regarding specific duties that were being directed by some of the school board members. In hind sight, she realized that the job proposal came with some undesirable expectations. One of her duties was to make personnel changes with specific staff members. The proposed changes to personnel were initiated by the two school board members who had recruited her. She was lead to believe that the removal of certain staff members was in the best interests of the entire district, but, she admitted these changes turned out to be a mistake.

My first bad choice, bad move was they wanted me to get rid of some people they didn't like, the board was split, it was them the couple and then it was their production manager and their office manager so you knew they had the four votes and the three others were dangly, the other three did not have the power in the board, *y me picadon los ojos* [they poked my eyes] telling me "*que*" they are worthless, unethical blah, blah, blah, so we went for reduction of work force , and

the reduction in force was targeted at the people they wanted to get rid of, and I got rid of them, because I believed they were not good and in hindsight, um it was a bad decision, I wish I could say I got rid bad people...but the bad people, I still have some there, I mean, I don't see me getting rid of them.

Some of the decisions that Rita made early in her superintendency had created turmoil for her from the community. She believed that her function as an effective district leader had been compromised, and she felt that she had lost the trust of district personnel.

The community took it real bad because they were home grown people, I got all kinds of ugliness towards me because I made such a stupid decision, you know I really did, I made a bad decision, oh yeah, and that time I was living alone...They (the employees) were scared to say anything, you know, they thought *esta nos va a corer* [she is going to run us off] it was coming from everyone and everyone knew I was a puppet , it was bad.

She assumed that she had been chosen for the position for the wrong reasons. She became disillusioned with some of the school board members and realized that she needed to empower herself, so she could make the necessary changes needed to improve her job performance as the district leader. She acknowledged that she had made some mistakes and that these mistakes affected how she was perceived by others. She felt that she had been manipulated by certain school board members in order to fulfill their personal agendas.

They wanted a puppet and they saw a deer blinded, "*ponte a pensar, ponte a pensar*" [think about it] you know a woman, over the hill, yeah, a High School Principal, this is a second job and they call you, they want you to be

superintendent... and I was so impressed, you talk about being wined and dined and the swimming pool, the tennis courts, the vehicles, etc. I was struck, so was my husband and my son...these people are very wealthy, everybody knows them and everybody talks about them very highly, very highly, they are Christians and are good people, so I never heard anything bad about them, nothing.

She began to object to some of the demands placed on her by individual school board members; demands which she deemed as inappropriate, and which were not in the best interests for all.

What came to me was the realization that you need to stop, you need to stop being a puppet *porque si me convenia* [it is convenient for me] being a puppet, it was convenient, because you get a lot of perks and you say, your selling yourself, yes I did, I sold myself.

Rita was candid in her explanation about her struggles navigating that first year in the superintendency, in what she perceived to be a treacherous environment. She tried to balance her professional integrity with distinct role expectations, which then created personal predicaments for her. She remained confident in her instructional leadership skills and strived to do what was best for the community, but, she was expected to appease exclusive school board members with contradicting ideals. She remained poised in her skills and was self-assured that she possessed the qualities that would lead the school in the right direction.

My scores are very good, the rigor is so enormous, but, I will tell you, I am good at what I do when it comes to curriculum. I know what to do and it was the administrative part of the superintendency that I sucked at...one thing that this job

has taught me is, *que*, if you want me, you are going to take me the way I am, *mi intendes* [you know what I mean]

These events impacted Rita's professional growth and caused her to be cautious about whom she sought out for support. She relied on her husband throughout this specific ordeal and shared examples of how he supported her. "My husband cause, he is an educator, before I swear it used to hurt, I cried, now I don't cry and it doesn't hurt, I toughened up, too, my husband he helped."

Eventually, Rita was able to develop additional support systems with newly elected school board members. She acknowledged that she also formed an alliance with her newly appointed associate superintendent. However, her relationship with her Associate Superintendent was estranged during her first year. One of her first directives was to demote her would be Associate Superintendent, from High School Principal to classroom teacher. After becoming more familiar with his quality of work, Rita recognized his potential as an educational leader and promoted him to the Assistant Superintendent position. She felt the previous demotion had been unjust and was an error in judgment. She expressed,

Then you know what I said, to hell with this shit and I made him my associate superintendent. It has been a good thing, I, don't trust anyone, the only one I trust is my associate superintendent, even the board, because they hated me; now they like me.

Rita's appointment to the superintendency was unique. She succeeded in establishing new practices as the district leader and was able to empower herself to make the necessary changes needed to move the district forward. Rita had achieved many

accomplishments throughout her career. Although, she had not aspired to the superintendency, once the opportunity presented itself, she realized it had been a hidden desire that she had not acknowledged earlier.

### **Catherine Garcia**

Catherine Garcia is the superintendent of a small city school district approximately thirty miles south of a metropolitan city adjacent to the coast. According to the demographic survey that Ms. Garcia completed for the study, the total student enrollment was 1,300 with a Hispanic majority student population of 77.9%. Catherine has over 23 years of experience in education. At the time of the interviews she was in the middle of her 11<sup>th</sup> year of her first superintendency. She is married with 2 children who lived at home. Her younger child was attending school in the school district where she is employed, and her older child was attending college.

Catherine grew up in a small town with a large Mexican American population. She graduated from high school in the same school district where she would ultimately become Superintendent of Schools. Both of her parents are Mexican American and were born in the United States. She traces her American heritage back to her maternal great-great grandparents. Neither parent completed high school. Catherine is the oldest of four girls; three of whom have college degrees. When Catherine spoke of her mother she became visibly emotional and held back tears. Her mother passed away two years earlier, and the loss was still heart-rending for Catherine. Her mother had Catherine at an early age, only 17 years, and each sister is only one year apart in age. Catherine said she had a fantastic upbringing, and she divulged that her parents really did not push her to attend college. Even though her parents did not have expectations of their children attending

college, they were supportive of whatever choices they made. Catherine explained by saying:

I don't know what I could say. Did they push me to go to college? We were four girls; three of us are college graduates and we are doing well financially, great careers. But, mom and dad never pushed us to go to college, never said yes, never said no...They could not help us pay for college...If we said we are not going to school this semester, they would say, 'ok, that's good'. If we were taking 18 hours, 'oh, good that is fantastic...you do what you need to do.' They didn't push us either way, but of course are very proud of us. But, I can't say they pushed us to go to school.

At the age of 22, Catherine began her educational career with a school district near the town where she grew up. Her first job was as a secretary in the superintendent's office, and she gradually progressed from secretary to Physical Education Teacher's Aide. Catherine attended a local college and lived with her parents while in school. Initially, she had not planned on a career in education. She wanted to have a large family, and was concerned about the ability to provide a better life for her future children. These two dreams were the motivating factors for her career choice. She believed the teaching profession would not only be a stable occupation, but it also offered flexible summer hours for a growing family. Catherine clarified her motivation for seeking a teaching degree with these words:

I will tell you when I graduated from high school my plans for college were pursuing a degree in radio and television. I wanted to be an anchor woman. I wanted to be on the news...But, just to say that I had a love for it and I grew up

playing school, nope. I thought this is probably a great secure job and it will allow me time off during the school year to raise a large family...Also, the fact that I was a secretary in education before I finished my degree...I was surrounded by so many administrators at central office that maybe inspired me...I guess at that point, I did not want to be a secretary all my life and be able to do more a little bit more for my family.

Immediately after earning her Bachelor's degree and teaching credentials, Catherine began her professional career as an elementary school teacher in the same school district where she had worked as a secretary and para-professional. She advanced to administration after two and a half years. Her first administrative position was as an elementary school assistant principal with a smaller school district, located within the same regional area. Catherine continued to move up the educational career ladder quickly. Her next administrative position was Intermediate School Principal with the school district where she eventually became superintendent. Catherine was quickly promoted to Curriculum Director, then Assistant Superintendent, and then Superintendent. She held the principal and curriculum director positions for only one year, and became superintendent after four years as Assistant Superintendent. Catherine was 32 years old when she first became superintendent. She has remained in a singular regional area throughout her educational career and has established a reputation as an effective educational leader in her district and adjacent school districts. One neighboring school district tried to recruit her as their Assistant Superintendent and offered her a considerable pay increase. Catherine turned down the generous offer. She said she was not interested in going to a larger district and that her neighboring school district "had a

lot of turmoil.” She was content with her role as the Assistant Superintendent at her school district, and when the superintendent position became available she did not wish to assume the role. She was persuaded to step in as the superintendent by her district’s school board members. They asked her to undertake the superintendency and if, after a reasonable time she chose not to remain in the position, she would be able to resume the assistant superintendent position. She described the circumstances with these words:

I had a fantastic job...Let me tell you how much I did not want to be a superintendent... and I was not interested in being an assistant superintendent in a larger school district...I turned down a \$40,000 increase in pay to stay here as the Assistant Superintendent...The gentleman that was here submitted his letter of resignation, and the school board said ‘we got a superintendent vacancy...you’re not going to go for it?’ I said, I have no interest in doing this job, and they said ‘we want you to do this job’. I had a school board that absolutely adored me, and they said ‘go ahead and try it and if you decide you don’t want to do it, maybe after a short time, we will put you back as Assistant Superintendent and we will find a superintendent’. I was so naive back then. They hired an assistant superintendent. Why would I think, I could go back to being assistant superintendent.

Catherine’s hesitancy for pursuing the superintendency was based on adversarial conflicts that her predecessor had encountered. She had obtained the necessary credentials needed for the superintendency and was confident in her skills. Yet, when she was considering whether or not to apply for the superintendency, she was cautious and contemplated her options. She explained:

I just did not know if that was what I wanted, obviously I had pursued the credentials for it. I had seen what the gentleman before me had experienced... I said, oh my God, I do not want anything to do with that...He just did not have the right chemistry with the school board...I figured I would not be successful if he wasn't successful... Here I was, *poyita* [baby chicken] 32 years old and this gentleman already in his late 50's and he wasn't successful. I said, oh, my gosh, if this gentleman with so much experience cannot come in and be successful, what luck I am going to have.

Eventually, Catherine chose to step into the superintendent position and she thrived in the in her new role. Catherine recognized that she was compatible with all the school board members and submitted her official application for the position. She was the sole applicant and was selected for the superintendent position with a unanimous vote from all seven school board members. She described the incident by saying:

I was not too excited about it, but I jumped in and did it. I guess I was their little security blanket. They absolutely adored me...and it was unanimous it was 7/0; they absolutely wanted me...I became superintendent and I have enjoyed my job... I have a fantastic school board.

Catherine has remained in the superintendency and has been an impressive district leader. She formed a favorable relationship with the school board members and the community. She has established a reputation with other school districts as an effective leader, so much so, that she is sought out by other school district board members. Her strongest skills are in public relations and she possesses a keenness for cultivating positive relationships. She described her job as phenomenal and is comfortable with her

school district. She has no interest in seeking another superintendent position with another school district. She shared:

I have done well...I obviously have the relationship skills and I have been a very serving leader...I have been asked many times to apply at other districts. I have been called so many times and it's funny. I go to board training in the summers and I have board members from other districts saying 'you really need to apply with us' in front of my board members...The increase in salary would be phenomenal, but I am not willing to do this job anywhere else. I am absolutely happy and satisfied.

Becoming a superintendent has been a great source of personal satisfaction for Catherine. She takes great pride in her work and continually caters to the needs of the community. Catherine's talents serve as an inspiration for aspiring women, especially Mexican American women seeking the superintendency.

### **Isabel Salinas**

Isabel Salinas is the superintendent of a suburban school district on the Texas coast. According to the demographic survey that Ms. Salinas completed, the school district's total student enrollment is 2,100 with a majority Hispanic population of 86.4% and an African American student population of 11.8%. At the time of the interview, Isabel was in her third superintendent position and was completing her 10<sup>th</sup> year in the superintendency. She is married and has three children. Isabel began work towards a doctorate degree, but chose to leave the program after she relocated for her second superintendency.

Isabel grew up in a small West Texas/Mexico border town on the Rio Grande. Both of her parents were of Mexican descent. Her mother was born in Mexico and moved to the United States in her early teens. Her father was an only child, born in Texas. Isabel is the oldest of three girls. Her father passed away when she was in her teens and she stated that being the oldest child along with the death of her father “shaped” who she was. She described the impact her father’s death had on her by saying, “father passed away, at age 15, I was the oldest, it shaped who I am, three girls raised at farm and land, we had cattle to take care of, being the oldest had a big influence, you can’t depend on anybody else, but yourself.” Her parents did not complete high school and their expectations for their children were that they go to college. As a child, Isabel was also encouraged by her paternal grandmother to go to college, who told her she was “smart enough” to go. Isabel referred to her grandmother as her role model and described her grandmother with these words “dad’s mother was a big influence, always fighting for what is right, just causes, and taking tough challenges, even when it is not popular, people need leaders and you do what is right.”

Isabel stated that because her father expected her to go to college, she never doubted that she would. She asserts that she was one of the “top students’ of her high school graduating class. Following graduation, she left home for college. Once in college she realized that she was not adequately prepared for college level coursework. She said, “I had a rude awakening, thinking I was prepared, and I wasn't really prepared.” This motivated her seek her teaching credentials. She returned to her home town to teach at the high school that she had graduated from. She said she wanted to “really make a difference.”

Isabel began her educational career as a high school English teacher. Just one year later, she began functioning as an educational leader when she was appointed Department Chair. She explained “pretty much anything that needed to be done, they tossed my way, and I wasn't able to say 'No!' So, I was really into leadership before I even realized what I was doing.” After five years as a classroom teacher, she was promoted to Assistant Principal. Two years later, she was asked to move to a district level administrative position as the Bilingual Director. She saw this as an opportunity to help the district improve instruction for students who were in the bilingual program. She said, “We were in a big mess with bilingual, and...I was, you know, called upon to help the district in the time of need, and I did.” At that time, Isabel began her coursework for her superintendent certification. Her intent was to obtain the superintendent certification before the State’s certification requirements changed from a life-time certification to a 5-year certification. She said, “So, then I set that as my goal, and I said I'm gonna get it done, even though it might be 10 years before I use it.” Isabel revealed that an opportunity for the superintendency presented itself much sooner than she had expected, while she was still working on her internship.

During her internship, the school district hired its first female superintendent.

Isabel divulged

My superintendent, who was the first female superintendent I'd ever had, you know, in my school . . . high school years. I'd see the superintendent in my elementary years, I'd see the superintendent, it was always old, White, bald, male, you know . . . men! And, I never once thought, you know, a woman could be there. I just thought that was like unattainable.

This new female superintendent became Isabel's mentor during her internship. Isabel explained that she gave her several projects that were crucial preparation for the superintendency. She mentioned that the internship was intense and said, "it was probably the toughest internship I'd ever had ... I called her [superintendent], I said I was her slave, for like a year, 'cause anything that needed to be done, it was like, 'here, here's a good project for you". Nevertheless, even though it was tough she embraced the challenge, and recognized how effectively it prepared her for the superintendency.

Isabel said that her promotion to superintendent was unforeseen. As she recalled the turn of events which led to opportunity, I found myself fascinated with her story.

Isabel explained that the next step in her career plan was to apply for the Elementary Principal position in her current school district. She set strategic goals which included moving up the career ladder at the school district where she was employed. She felt that additional administrative experience as a principal would be useful for the superintendency. She became Elementary School Principal, and continued to work on the requirements for her superintendent certification. She shared that at this time, she needed to complete one last project for the internship. Her mentoring superintendent asked her to fill out an application packet for a superintendent's position which had been recently posted. Isabel recalls her conversation with her superintendent, "I said, 'and that's it? You promise me? I'm done with you?' And, she said, 'yes, you know, that's it for me.'" Isabel completed the packet and submitted it to her superintendent. In her disbelief, Isabel received a phone call from a search consultant informing her that she had been selected to interview for the superintendent position. She said she had no idea that her interview packet was going to be given to school district for consideration. She explained that her

superintendent had given her portfolio to a search consultant for feedback on the contents of the packet. The search consultant had submitted the packet to the hiring school board members for their consideration. This new occurrence was a surprise to Isabel, so she called her mentor for advice. She also called her husband to inform him of the new circumstances. She discussed her options with her husband and mentor. She decided to move forward with the interview. She explained that at that time, she did not consider herself as a strong candidate for the position, but that the opportunity to interview for a superintendent position could be practice for future interviews. She described the interview in these words;

So, what was supposed to be a two hour interview turned into a four hour grilling session, and I was exhausted by the time I got out of there, and I was like, 'I don't know about this, I don't think I'm ever gonna do this again, this is like too exhausting, too grilling . . . I love what I do, and why would I even accept, you know, coming to this for what? I'm not even interested in the job; I don't care about the job...I'm thinking...' good kind of interview, you know, we were really in sync'. So, I go home thinking there's assistant superintendents that applied for the job, there's people with a lot of experience, I'm a rookie, five years of experience as a teacher, three at that point, four years as an administrator, I'm thinking 'I have no chance at all.

Isabel described a completely unexpected turn of events. The morning after the interview she received a phone call from the search consultant who told her that she had been selected for the position. Isabel said she was astonished that she had been selected for the superintendent position and she had several things to consider before accepting.

Her immediate thought was, “I’m like, this isn’t happening to me . . . we’d just built a house . . . my husband has his business there . . . everything . . . so, never really expected to even move.” Not only was she surprised with the outcome of the interview, but she shared that her superintendent was equally stunned. She recalled her superintendent’s reaction to the news as follows:

And she's like, 'I am just floored . . . ' she said, 'not that I doubt that you can't do it, it's just that it's never happened . . . in my experience I've never seen anybody just go to, you know, just send one application and they get an interview, and from that 1 interview you get the job!

Isabel understood this was an extraordinary opportunity, and knew this was what she wanted to accomplish. But, she did not expect this to occur until later on in her career. She resolved that if she did not accept this offer and opted to remain with her current school district, she would be at their “mercy”. Her words were:

Because I was going to be at their mercy [current school district], you know, whenever they felt like I was ready, and they could leave me as principal for 20 years, you know, and never really give me that opportunity. But yet, here's this district that's willing to give me the opportunity, now!...keep the principal-ship in an uncertain future of when you would become [superintendent]?, or do it now and just you know . . . be brave and go for it!

After talking with her husband, Isabel decided to take this unexpected and sudden opportunity. The job was with a school district approximately two hours away from their home, and meant that she would have to move. She spoke of how her husband was in the process of starting up a new business and they did not think he should leave his business

at that time. So they decided it would be best for the family for her husband to stay behind. Isabel moved, with their three children, who at that time were four, six, and eight years old. She explained that she received support from her husband and her younger sister. She shared:

Yes, they were there with me [her children], and so it ahh, it was difficult . . . and, if it hadn't been for family support, and my husband coming in, you know, at least in the middle of the week, and on weekends... we'd trade off... one weekend I'd drive, you know, he'd come in on Wednesday nights to see us, and, so it was very supportive kind of environment. Otherwise then, I don't think I could have made it, you know, as much as I wanted, and as much... desire and knowledge that I could have for it... it has to be a support system.

Isabel remained at her first superintendency for three years. After the 3<sup>rd</sup> year, she chose to leave the district because she had been accepted into a doctoral program at the University of Texas in Austin. She discussed that she had accomplished the goals she had envisioned for the school district and sensed it was time to do something different. She mentioned “our school was being recognized as a Blue Ribbon School, and you kind of think, you know, you've just kind of put the bow on things, you've done what you need to do and it's time to move on”.

By this time her husband had established his business and he was able to move with her and her and their children to Austin. She accepted an internship with the Texas Association of Secondary School Administrators, while also attending doctoral classes. She shared that her husband remained supportive of her aspirations:

I was the one that got it with TASSA... I wouldn't have left my superintendency... without having any means of supporting my family. And, so, my husband left, you know, the business, he was going back and helping... but he had turned it over to his brother, so pretty much he was committed to helping me get it done..

After two and a half years, Isabel was selected for her second superintendency, and she and her family relocated to South Texas. Before moving, Isabel had completed the majority of the required classes for the doctoral program and thought “OK, I'm pretty much done with my coursework. I've got my first three chapters done. I can do this!” Her intent was to complete the doctorate program and work at the same time. However, she eventually chose to leave the doctoral program. She remained at her second superintendency for six years, and then moved on to her next superintendency. At the time of the interview she was ending her second year in her third superintendency.

Isabel continues to set goals for herself and she aspires to obtain a superintendent position with a large urban school district. I found Isabel’s story of her ascension into the superintendency quite remarkable. She had set her aspirations for the superintendency early on in her educational career and she was able to accomplish her goals much sooner than she had anticipated. When she reached her goal of becoming a superintendent she expressed how she experienced momentary disbelief, using these words to explain her astonishment:

“I'm like, this isn't happening to me...I was not looking for a job . . . I was, you know, not even considering that . . . it just happened by chance that, you know,

somebody just kind of pushed me into, for experience sake, I took the advice, and it all just happened.

Isabel is a unique female in her field and has been successful in gaining access to a historically male dominated profession. I consider her story and her voice as empowering for other women who aspire to the superintendency.

### **Irma Gonzales**

Irma Gonzales is the Superintendent of a rural school district located in the south central region of the state. She has been in an administrator capacity with the school district for more than 20 years. This is her first superintendency and at the time of the interview she was beginning her 9<sup>th</sup> year as Superintendent of Schools. She is married with three children who attend school in the school district that she leads. Irma has earned her doctoral degree. The demographic survey that she completed stated that the total student enrollment in the district was 7,391. The majority student population is Hispanic (65.9%) with the remaining students divided between Anglo (26.7%) and African American (5.7%). Ms. Gonzales disclosed that over her tenure with the school district the student population profile has shifted from an Anglo majority to a Hispanic majority.

Irma grew up in small South Texas town with a large Hispanic population (98%). She is 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Mexican American; both her mother and father were born in the United States. Both of her parents graduated from high school, but neither one attended college. Irma has three sisters and one brother; she is the middle child. Irma asserted that she had always been driven to attain a leadership role and said, “I am a middle child so I am sure that plays a role.” She mentioned that her parents emphasized the importance of

an education to all their children. She grew up in a community where she had Hispanic role models who had completed college and she shared that she had high school teachers and other professionals who inspired her to pursue a college degree. Irma recalled her primary school years and said “I remember being in a bilingual community. Everything that we were taught was in both languages.” She emphasized that she had the opportunity to be “taught by some great teachers.” She strived to do well in school and graduated as the valedictorian of her senior class.

After high school, she left her hometown to attend college at the University of Texas in Austin. She said, “I left the valley had never been on my own, found my way, registered myself for classes and figured out where my dorm was . . . I became independent pretty quickly.” Each of her siblings obtained college degrees and her oldest sister also earned a doctoral degree and is an Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum at a large school district in East Texas.

After Irma completed her bachelor’s degree, her goal was to complete a master’s degree as soon as possible. As she began her educational career as a classroom teacher and a coach with a large school district, she also enrolled in a master’s program and attended evening classes to pursue her administrative certification. She said, “I was very goal oriented. I knew that I would pursue a career beyond being in the classroom. I guess I have always been driven in the leadership role.”

Irma remained in the classroom for approximately five years while her husband worked toward his degree. She worked in one city while her husband attended school in a different city. They lived in a small town that was centrally located between the two metropolitan cities in order to minimize the commuting time and distance for both. After

completing his college degree her husband secured a permanent position in the town where Irma would eventually become superintendent. At her husband's suggestion, Irma explored administrative opportunities in the school district where he would be working. She applied for, and was selected for an assistant principal position in one of the middle schools. She served in that role for one year. Following that, she was appointed to serve as Interim Principal for the next year, at which time she was selected as the permanent principal.

Earning a doctorate degree had long been a goal of hers, so during her term as a principal she enrolled in a doctoral program. She said:

I completed my master's and I guess I would call myself a lifelong learner. I was ready to pursue my doctorate, but at that time period you pretty much had to give up working and work on your doctorate full time...so I completed my masters, continued in the education field and eventually pursued an administrative position which happened to be here.

She spoke of her experience of being a working mother while pursuing her doctoral degree. She said, "My husband and I did not have children until after 10 years....We focused on our careers and by the time I had my kids I was pursuing a doctorate." When she enrolled in the doctoral program her first child was 2 years old and her 2<sup>nd</sup> child was an infant. By the time she earned her doctorate degree she had had her 3<sup>rd</sup> child. She shared that attending classes for the doctorate degree was a challenge for her, but she had an extensive support system in place to help her cope with the challenges of working and studying. She relied on her family (husband, mother and sister) to help with the children. She described how much their help meant to her.

Sometimes her husband's job required him to travel out of town, so her mother who lived in South Texas would drive up to stay with her and the children. On several occasions, when her mother was unable to make the drive, Irma's sister who lived in East Texas would come to help and support her. Her drive to succeed is expressed with these words:

When I finished my doctorate, I had a 1, 3, and 5 year old. So when folks talk about the challenges of continuing and pursuing their education, if you have the will and the desire to complete it, it is possible.

Irma gradually continued to move up the career ladder within the same school district. She was the Principal at the middle school for seven years and then became the High School Principal for 3 ½ years. During the spring semester of her 3<sup>rd</sup> year as the High School Principal, she was promoted to Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources. She served in that role for less than one year before being appointed as the Interim Superintendent, and applied for the permanent position. She said:

That was kind of one of those awkward situations, 'cause you are serving in an interim role and the board is determining the process they are going to follow to actually fill the position. I was interested in the position... When it was all said and done I ended up in the superintendent role.

Irma has continued to serve as the Superintendent of Schools with the school district; however she had not expected that the course of her administrative career would remain with a single school district. She explained:

When you come into a community, you think you are going to go in and stay two to three years and then do something different. For me I had the opportunity early on in my career to move into other roles and to continue to pursue career

aspirations. Once I got into administration, I knew that my ultimate goal would be to be a superintendent, to say that I intended it to be here is not necessarily the case.

Irma divulged that her ascension into the superintendency occurred much more rapidly than she had expected. She was selected for the superintendency immediately after becoming the Associate Superintendent of Human Resources. She described this transition as a quick process, after serving as Assistant Superintendent position for less than a year. The quick transition occurred because her preceding superintendent took a leave of absence in the fall semester of the following school year, and requested that Irma be appointed as the Interim Superintendent. She said,

It happened that quick and rapidly . . . So it was kind of a unique situation, because not only is she requesting a leave of absence at the same time she has already set her plan in place with a systematically forethought of how to transition without the school district missing a beat...she provides a recommendation...I think it got dropped on my lap prematurely and I say that it happened pretty quickly.

Irma referred to her superintendent as “a role model and real mentor.” She shared that her predecessor, who was a White female, had served in the superintendent capacity with the school district for nine years and was in her second superintendency. This superintendent recognized Irma’s leadership potential and had a vision for Irma’s future role as a superintendent. Irma explained that when her superintendent resigned, she recommended to the district’s school board member that they select Irma as her replacement. Irma shared a conversation she had had with her superintendent:

My superintendent told me, ‘you know there are some challenging things that I deal with. When you come into this role you will be able to impact and make a much bigger difference in areas that I was unable to’ and she was unable to because she was a White female. She said ‘you know the folks that come to me for assistance, I do not have the same credibility that you will have, in understanding the culture and in being part of the culture and being able to speak the language’

Irma also talked about the history of segregation in the school district. She said, “Our community has experienced several years of segregation that has taken place and it influences and impacts generations of families as a result of those experiences.” She acknowledges that these experiences differ from her personal experience and she expressed this difference with these words:

Personally having come from the valley I did not grow up with those challenges... but our community here does have those influences... educationally there were divisions where Hispanics went to school and where the blacks went to school... so, we have kids that come through our system who are being raised by grandparents... who did not have the opportunity to go all the way through high school, so we talk about my personal generation, my grandparents coming from Mexico and my parents having a high school diploma and all of us being degreed, there are some kids in our community that are right now at the starting point.

Irma has remained the superintendent of schools in this small community for nine years. She has established a positive reputation as an effective leader and her presence as

the district leader provides inspiration for others. She has worked as an administrator for the school district for over 20 years. She shared that her longevity in the community has allowed her to develop and maintain relationships. Irma explained:

Over time you're able to establish relationships. You are able to understand the culture of the community and really be embedded as a member of the community. I wear two hats in the community, that as superintendent and that as parent. I had three kids that have come through the system. I have been able to develop relationships not only in the professional side of my career, but, also being a parent. I think it has provided me with an opportunity to look at what we do education wise, through difference lenses.

She said that remaining in the same community can “work for you or against you.” She expressed that as a superintendent “there are some tough decisions that have to be made and you are not going to keep everybody happy.” She remains involved in the community and makes herself visible. Her children, who have grown up in the same community are also involved in extracurricular activities. This allows Irma not only the opportunity to attend her own children’s activities, but makes it easy to make herself visible. She said:

The more active my kids are with school related activities, the more visible it also allows you to be as a school superintendent with different actives. I also make it a point to go watch and be a part of the other functions...even if it is just going briefly...showing that support.

Irma has achieved her goal of becoming a superintendent. She has established herself in the small community not only as a valuable district leader but also as an

accommodating parent. She shared, “you always keep in perspective that you have to balance both ends.” She is content with her current role and does not wish to pursue another superintendent position elsewhere. She said, “I am blessed to work with a board that understands the importance of staying focused on kids.”

### **Gabriella Evans**

Gabriella Evans is the Superintendent of a small city school district in the Southern region of the state, on the Texas Coastal Bend. The demographic survey that Ms. Evans completed indicated that the district’s total student enrollment is 5,479. The student population of this district is primarily Hispanic (93.4%). Gabriella has over 20 years of experience in education, and at the time of the interview, was ending her first year in her 2<sup>nd</sup> superintendency. Her first superintendency had been with a small rural school district in the same region, with a total student population of approximately 600 students. She served in that position for four years. Gabriella was in her second marriage, has three adult children from her first marriage, and has earned her doctoral degree.

Gabriella is 4<sup>th</sup> generation Mexican American. Her mother and father are of Mexican descent, both parents having been born in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Her mother and father both have college degrees and her mother was a school teacher. Gabriella grew up in a large family, she has eight brothers and sisters. Gabriella stated that both of her parents served as role models for all nine children. Each sibling attended college and each one earned some level of college degree. She expressed that each of her brothers and sisters had the drive to be successful in their careers and that her parents modeled this

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<sup>3</sup> Gabriella has kept her maiden name which is not a traditional Spanish last name, it appears to be Anglo-Saxon. She did not know the history, she stated “obviously I am not Anglo, [name] comes from my father’s side it goes way back”

work ethic. She said “the importance of getting ahead and having aspirations, I think it was instilled in us at a very early age.”

Gabriella shared that when she was in high school she knew she wanted to pursue a doctoral degree. She recalled how other students laughed at her when she said she was going to get her doctorate. The school district that she attended while growing up had a low percentage of high school graduates. She explained that the teasing from the other students did not discourage her from pursuing her dreams. She recalled her feelings, “I said I am going to show them, also, there were a lot of people there that would tell me, I was not college material, even some teachers.” She did mention one high school teacher (Ms. Peña) who encouraged her to pursue her goals. However, she did not attend college immediately after graduating from high school. She explained that her educational journey was not very easy. She described this phase of her life with these words:

I got married, was in the military, had four kids, got divorced, so I was a single parent for a very long time...I thought it was important to be a good role model for my children...I started my college degree, it took me 7 years... it was hard.

After Gabriella obtained her bachelor’s degree and teaching credentials, she began her educational career as a high school teacher in the school district where she grew up. Gabriella set her goal for the superintendency at the on-set of her educational career. She taught at her home town high school for three years and then moved to a neighboring school district and taught there for three more years. She began a master’s program for her administrative certification and said,

I had to work 2 jobs...I would teach during the day and then I would teach college in the evenings, um it took me forever to get my master's degree because I was a single parent and it took me 5 years.

She gradually began to move up the career ladder after obtaining her master's degree. She returned to her own high school to begin her first administrative position as the high school assistant principal. Gabriella stayed in that position for a short period of time. As she continued to progress through her administrative career, she had the opportunity to serve in different administrative capacities with different school districts that were located within the same geographical area. She said that she found it was important that she remain mobile in order to continue to progress within the educational career ladder. She explained, "You have to be able to do what you have to. To be mobile if you want to get ahead, just like men are mobile. I think it is very important for females to be mobile." She obtained her first principal position in a small school district at the District's Alternative Educational Program. She then obtained her second principalship as a High School Principal at larger high school in a neighboring school district. It was at that time that she began work on her doctorate degree. She explained:

The opportunity came along with a doctoral program. I still had kids at home and now I have a boyfriend [future husband] and we talked about it...He encouraged me...So I took that on...I was a principal...I was doing long hours and I did not have an assistant principal. I would go to all the games take my paperwork, and my mailings and stapler, and work.

Gabriella worked in that capacity for three years. She earned her doctorate degree and then became Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction with a group of

charter schools located in the Valley. She was responsible for starting up two additional high schools in that area. It was during this time that she began her search for a superintendency. She said that it took her several years to obtain her first superintendent position (5 years). Gabriella's aspirations all along had ultimately been to obtain a superintendent position. She said, "I always knew I wanted to be a superintendent. I had a bucket list...I was determined I was going to do that, that was always my goal."

She acknowledged that obtaining her first superintendency took longer than she had wished. She explained that she submitted several applications for superintendent positions but was not being called for interviews. When asked how many applications she had submitted she said, "Oh my God! About 30, over a 5 year period, maybe more, but at the very least 30! I mean I could not understand why I was not being called." She believed that she had taken the necessary steps to make herself marketable and she considered herself as possessing "well rounded skills." She said, "I had a doctorate degree, I had experience. I was certified in several areas. I had done college. I was excellent in curriculum...I had no idea, why I was not being called!" She continued her search for a superintendent position, and was finally selected for an interview with a small school district. The school district's school board members were all Hispanic, six males and one female. She accepted the invitation for the interview. She was doubtful that she would be selected for the position. She said "I went in there and I thought, I will take a shot at it, never thought in a million years I would get it." She was surprised to find out that she had been selected for the position. She shared her reaction when she received the news:

We interviewed, then the board got together and they made a selection, and I got a call about 11 at night. It was from the female board member... 'I just wanted to tell you that you got the position' and I am like OK, thank you very much for the opportunity to interview... She said 'aren't you happy?' and I am like happy, why? 'Because, you got the job.' I said I got the job? It was so funny... I just never thought I would get it.

She accepted the superintendent position and shared, "It was a real shocker not only for me, but for the community because I was the first female ever... a little town." She had finally reached her goal of obtaining the superintendency, however, she had concerns about the school district's school board members. She said:

I was very apprehensive because you are talking about all Hispanic men and I knew that some of those males were going to have some issues, you know, getting to or adhering to certain things I would have to say. I don't know if they hired me because I was qualified or they hired me because they thought they would be able to control me.

Gabriella conveyed that the first year of her superintendency went well and called this the "honeymoon" phase. The district made gains with student performance within that year. However, she explained that she had a school board that did not always support her decisions which was challenging for her. She asserted that only 2 of the 7 school board members collaborated and supported her decisions. Eventually, her relationship with some of the school board members began to deteriorate. After her third year as the Superintendent, she was asked to resign from the school district. She said that she refused to resign at that time because she was planning on retiring the following year and she did

not want to seek employment at a different school district and work there for only one year. She said, “How was I going to take another job for only one year. I am not that type of person. I follow through with my commitment.” So, she remained in the superintendent position with the school district and finished out her 4<sup>th</sup> year and retired at the end of the school year. She described the challenges she faced during that time with these words:

I just can't deal with the politics with the board politics. They drove me crazy....It is already difficult enough you know, to do the job. You know what you have to do and having interference from people who are not educators. I am not saying that the board members are not highly intelligent, but if you don't have a background in education it is hard for them to understand a lot of things. So, when they place obstacles in your path and you know the job you have to do, you have to go around those obstacles. Well, that's just times and energy...I could not deal with that and I was so burned out.

After retiring Gabriela and her husband traveled for a year and then she decided to return to work. She obtained a job with the regional Educational Service center and was placed on the interim superintendent list. This decision would allow her to work temporary positions at local school districts that were in the process of searching for permanent superintendents. She shared that at that time she was not interested in seeking a second superintendency. She accepted an interim superintendent position with her current district and was asked if she was interested in a permanent position. She said, “They asked are you interested in a long term position, I go no, Hell no! I was like totally burned out and I was not interested”!

However, her plans changed after serving in the interim superintendent capacity. She shared that when the position was posted, she was encouraged by some board members to apply for the permanent position. Even though her previous intentions had been to work temporarily so she could continue to travel with her husband, she realized that she had actually missed what she called the “stimulation” that comes with working as an administrator in the educational setting. She shared,

It’s funny to us, because they [husbands] don’t understand the pace when you are in a school district this large even in a smaller one... because you wear so many hats...how you do not have time to eat a snack or go to the bathroom or whatever.

After discussing it with her husband, she decided to apply for the superintendent position. She interviewed for the position and was selected. She described her interview as follows:

They interviewed a couple of people, and I thought I may not get the job here because there were only two board members that wanted me to apply. One of the board members came by later and shared with me and kind of laughed...I said, did I not do well in the interview or did I say something that was funny?...He said ‘no people came in and they brought their binders and all this stuff and they had this and that...and I am the last one and I walk in there with nothing...no pen, no binder nothing’...I said Sir, I don’t need all that stuff, because, if you have done it; you don’t have to show anything. It is going to be evident that you know what you are talking about...

At the time of the interview, Gabriella was entering her 2<sup>nd</sup> year as the Superintendent of Schools with the school district. She shared that she has a positive

relationship with all school board members and because of their support she has been successful in making necessary changes to the school district which have resulted in overall improvements. She acknowledges that change is sometimes difficult but she has had the backing from the district's school board members when she has had to implement difficult decisions that affect staff. Some of the decisions include bringing in new campus administrators, providing them with professional development in effective instructional leadership, and also removing other staff members who have not been able to improve instruction.

Gabriella demonstrated a sense of empowerment with her second superintendency and she attributed this sense to her status of being a retire rehire. She expressed, "I am retired. I do not need this job. If I get it fine, if I don't get it fine, which is a fantastic attitude to have... You just tell them, whatever, if they like it, they like it, if they don't like it, whatever, no harm... I still have my *checkisito* [check] coming in."

Becoming a superintendent has been a source of personal satisfaction for Gabriella. When she was asked if she had a mentor or an individual that encouraged her to pursue the superintendency, she said, "No, I always knew, that I wanted to get it, it was the ultimate goal and I had already done it." She is content with her current position and does not have the desire to seek another position. The following comment sums up her attitude and satisfaction with her current role:

"Hell, [she laughs] I am retired, I have the attitude I am here to do a job and if they don't like it they can let me know and it will take me 30 seconds to write my letter of resignation. I think that is very, very powerful! What motivates me in this

district is that we have a very good board and they want only good things for the school...If I had a board that was not supportive I would not stay.

### **Rachel Robertson**

Rachel Robertson is the superintendent of an urban school district in Central Texas. According to the demographic survey that Ms. Robertson completed, the total student enrollment was over 10,000 with a large Hispanic majority student population of 97.1%. Rachel has more than 30 years of experience in education, and this is her first superintendency. At the time of the interview she was completing her 1<sup>st</sup> year as the Superintendent of Schools. Rachel has never been married and does not have any children.

Rachel grew up in a US—Mexico border town located on the Rio Grande with a majority Mexican American population. She is 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Mexican American. Both of her parents were born in the United States, and Rachel was raised in the same town that her father grew up in. Neither her mother nor father finished high school. Rachel recalled her parent's home as, "The house to be at...People were always welcomed at our house." She said that father worked as a taxi driver and had developed good relationships within the community. She shared that she was allowed to drive around with her father while he worked and this gave her the opportunity to meet diverse groups of people. She is the youngest of seven children; she has four brothers and two sisters. Because her sisters were much older, she played and spent more time with her brothers and their friends when she was a little girl. She said:

I played *las canicas* [marbles] and hiding go seek, it was just simple times back then...I grew up skinning deer...I worked on motors...because my brothers were

‘come here hold this and that, unscrew this that’, my dad was like ‘you’re going to learn how to change your tire; how to change you oil’. I actually knew how to hotwire a car back then, cars were very simple back then. So, I kind of just grew up around the boys.

Rachel’s parents encouraged her to attend college; however, they expected her to go to the local community college. But, her dreams for college differed from her parent’s expectations. She expressed that when she was in high school her goal for college was to leave her hometown to attend college in San Marcos. She was influenced by her high school English Teacher who she referred to as her “role model.” She said that this teacher, whom she had had for three years of her high school English classes, was the person who motivated her to become a teacher, so Rachel wanted to attend the same college that her role model had attended. She described her as “the one I held very dear to my heart.” After graduating from high school Rachel left her home town to attend college in San Marcos. She described her experience of leaving home alone to attend college for the first time with these words:

I went to San Marcos. My parents gave me \$500 and they gave me their blessing and said good luck. So with \$500, I went to San Marcos. I had not registered. I had not gone to freshman orientation. I showed up. I was like ‘OK what I do? Lord and behold I had signed up for 16 hours my first semester. I lived in a hotel for about a week because there was no dormitory available. Then they found me a dorm. I lived in a dorm with no air conditioner, nothing. I became an RA [Resident Assistant] so I could pay my room and board and I put myself through college. I finished in 3 years, because it was costing me money. I worked at

Aquarina Springs in the summers and I was the manager of the snack bar. I supervised high school kids, [laughter] it was hilarious!

Rachel returned to her home town to teach after completing college and remained there as an educator for 31 years. She said she went back to her home town because “she wanted to make a difference.” She was a teacher for 14 years before moving up to administration. Her first administrative position was Language Arts Director and she remained in that position for three years. During her 3<sup>rd</sup> year as the Language Arts Director, the school district was in the process of building a new elementary campus and she applied for the principal position. She explained even though she was a district administrator, the principal position was considered a promotion. She became the principal for the new elementary campus and held that position for three years. She expressed how she was proud of herself for having the opportunity to open up a new campus. After her 3<sup>rd</sup> year there, she was moved to a different elementary campus to serve in the same role. She said that she did not want to move to another campus, but she really was not given a choice in the matter. She explained:

There was a lot of internal issues with staff, lots of mistrust with parents and the PTO...There was a lot of turmoil that year. So, she needed someone to go in and clean it up and stabilize it. So, I ended up moving to that particular campus that had not been successful with increasing student performance.

Rachel remained the Principal at that campus for seven years, and was able to successfully increase student performance. She then was promoted to the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum. After three years, the superintendent position became available. She applied and interviewed for it; however, she was not selected. She

mentioned that she was one of the top two candidates for the position, but when the district's school board members voted for their final selection, she received three votes favoring her and four votes against selecting her. The other candidate received a close majority vote, four votes for him and three against him. He accepted the school board's offer of the position. The individual that was selected for the position was a Latino male and Rachel disclosed that she knew him, because he had previously worked in the district. According to Rachel he had been an administrator in the human resources department for one year, and she claimed that he did not have experience as a campus administrator. She disclosed a sensitive conversation she had with one of the district's board members. She recalled this significant event as follows;

What was so interesting is that the day after I had a board member, one of the board members that had voted against me...and he says 'I really need to explain to you why I voted against you...I voted against you because you do such an awesome job in curriculum. We can't afford to move you.'" I said, you are telling me I do an awesome job in curriculum...I am actually running half of the district already, because, every time there is problem, you dump the department on me and then you want me to fix it, which I do. I said there are three assistant superintendents, two are male and I am a female...I make less money than my two counterparts...and because I do a good job you are punishing me! 'I really, really need for you to help the new superintendent. He is going to need a lot of help....I thought, I am not good enough to be the superintendent, yet, you want me to help this person to become the superintendent. I said wow, wow, I was just floored!!

This telling event prompted Rachel to continue to search for superintendent positions at other school districts. She declared:

I went home that day and I said this is crazy. I have always lived in this community. I came back to the community where I grew up in, because, I really wanted to make a difference in my community. But, if my work and everything I have done is not going to be valued, I felt I needed to go somewhere else.

She began to actively apply for superintendent positions, and focused her search within a restricted area, because she did not want to move too far from her home town. She limited her search to school districts in the central and southern part of the state. Soon after, she was selected for an interview which would lead to her 2<sup>nd</sup> superintendent position. She said, “Lord and behold I ran across this district, and I went through the interview process and everything else and here I am today and so here I am today [laughter].” The district’s school board members voted unanimously, (7/0), to select Rachel as the new superintendent of schools. She indicated that the make-up of the school board members consisted of one white female, three Hispanic females, and three Hispanic males.

For Rachel, leaving her home town was a difficult decision. Her original goal had been that in the long run she would serve as the superintendent in her home town. But when she was not able to reach her goal within her own community, she made a conscious decision to seek the superintendency elsewhere. She described this choice with these words:

I always wanted to give back to my community. I even ran the summer softball league for the girls...I never expected to leave, so leaving was a big deal. I mean

it was a leap of faith. It really was a huge leap of faith... I had to make a choice; you can spend the rest of your life wondering whether if you were able to be a superintendent or not or just go out there and do it. I was like what do I have to lose. I had already been told, no, before, so you have nothing to lose, I was OK and moved on.

At the time of our interview, Rebecca was ending her first school year as the Superintendent of Schools with a school district that had a reputation of being in turmoil. She explained:

If you know the history, this is a very volatile district and in fact when I applied people are like ‘Are you crazy’! I had so many warnings, friends from TEA, friends from across the state. They were *estas loca* [are you crazy]! I am just like yeah, I am up for the challenge. I like challenges. They [school board members] were constantly in the newspaper. I swear to God, before I got it.

Rachel is not one to shy away from a challenge. So, she began her superintendent career fully aware that if she was going to lead the school district in the right direction, she would have to make some unprecedented changes. She said one of the reasons she was selected for the position was because the school board members were looking for a “change agent to come in and make it happen.” One of her first tasks was evaluating the overall needs of the district. She acknowledged that she immediately realized that the school district was in a “lot of trouble.” She described some of the issues as follows:

I knew we were broken coming in, because that was what the data was telling me, but coming into the district it wasn’t broken it was shattered! It was not at a point that we could grab pieces and try to glue them together. It was literally

knocking it down completely and starting from scratch. So we had to really work on developing procedures... just simple systems, because it was non-existent. So all year long that is all we have worked on, systems, procedures, and following laws!

She explained that the district was entering its 3<sup>rd</sup> year of being cited for non-compliance with their Title One, Special Education, and Bilingual programs by local, state, and federal agencies. When she was hired the school board members asked her to bring in some external people to help turn the district around. She said that she was successful in recruiting “key players” and ended up with a “very good administrative cabinet” that had expertise in the areas of accountability. Another area that needed immediate improvement was increasing the opportunities for staff development for classroom teachers. She explained that some of the classroom teachers were not trained on data driven instruction, so she partnered up with the district’s regional education center to provide the necessary training for effective instruction. Naturally, she encountered the typical resistance to change from staff members. Some expressed their anxiety by saying ‘we have always done it this way.’ Her reaction to such comments was “That is why the scores are the way they are. That is why we are being cited for non-compliance... That can’t happen anymore those things have to get fixed.”

Eventually with the assistance from her administrative cabinet she was successful in making gradual improvements to the district’s accountability concerns. She said, “I am glad to say for all the things that we did even though the district had been cited for three years by TEA... we finally got a letter clearing us.” She said they were able to

accomplish this task by working together as a team. She described their commitment to making improvements to the school district with these words:

It's incredible; we broke it down to what needed to be fixed. We worked as a team, everything was a team effort, and no one did anything in isolation. It is a lot of empowerment. This is what we need to attack...I am a firm believer of bringing problems to the table and finding a solution...Then get it done. You are in charge, just keep me abreast on what you are doing and it is lots of communication. It is about a leadership team, people coming together, with common vision and goals.

However, she encountered unforeseen opposition from some of the district's school board members in her ongoing efforts to establish comprehensive improvements. Rachel was in the process of wrapping up the school year with the typical end of the year duties. Her new challenge was coping with the inner turmoil from the school district's board. She said, "We were doing great up until early April, things just started unraveling with the board." She expressed that the "politics" of certain school board members were interfering with the most recent undertakings of closing the current school year. She described these issues by saying:

It is amazing how they target people... I ended up losing most of my staff that I had brought in, because they were being targeted, by the board. I swear to God and it happened so fast. We had worked very hard to establish our relationships, getting them to focus on education [the school board]. It's about the kids...By April, it was just full blown politics! I mean it! They forgot about the kids, forgot

about everything. It all became ‘me, me, and me’ in just a matter of a week, just like that and it just self-destructed and I was like oh my, gosh! It was so crazy!

Rachel explained that her biggest challenge at that time was getting all the board members to agree to her recommendations for renewing staff contracts for the following school year. Rachel’s perception was that some staff members had become accustomed to not being held accountable for some of their actions. She explained that certain board members were resistant to making the necessary changes to the recommended staff reassignments. She asserted, “If people don’t do their job it is our job to call it to their attention...if you have a problem, then you have to fix it.” She explained that during the most recent board meeting the progress that she and her team had made came to an abrupt halt. She said:

When you start targeting employees and you want to start picking and choosing who gets a contract who doesn’t and it is not about job performance. It is about someone out there who does not like them. Well it is not about like or dislike, it is about accountability. People in this district were never held accountable and that was a big problem...The board had been very supportive and then politics happened. It is no longer about we, so right at this point in time we are stuck in the mud.

Rachel disclosed that the challenges that had surface were not new to the community. She divulged that the community told her that they were all too familiar with these types of behaviors from the school board members. She repeated some of the comments that she heard from a few community members, such as “this happens every

May” and ‘keep your head low don’t make eye contact so you don’t get targeted.’” It is not in Rachel’s character to avoid conflict and she said:

I can’t do that...I had people from the community tell me ‘don’t take sides, *mieja*, [dear] don’t take sides, you are doing a great job’. I don’t believe in keeping my head down. I have not done anything wrong. I stand by my word and my head is held high...I have my integrity... That is who I am!

In addition to these conflicts, Rachel voiced that her major concern at that time was her ability to bring in qualified staff to the school district to replace those administrators who had resigned from the school district. She shared that when things began to deteriorate, she informed them that they needed to do what they felt was best for themselves and their families. She said she lost key players from her administrative cabinet and she expressed her concerns about being able to replace the crucial positions with these words:

A lot of the initiatives that we created we can’t do...until we go out and hire those key people again. How are we going to be able to get quality people? Who wants to come to this chaos? What happened is that they [school board] started bickering among themselves...I have no idea what this board is going to do.

Overall, Rachel has demonstrated that she is a strong educational leader through her words and actions. She has accomplished her goal of obtaining the superintendency and she expressed her commitment to that role with these words, “I have a job to do and I hold my job very sacred and I am going to do what I have to do because it is my job.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Two months after our interview, one of the local news stations announced that Ms. Robertson had resigned from her position as superintendent of schools

Not only does Rachel exhibit a strong work ethic she also serves as a role model for others. These words convey inspiration for other women aspiring to the superintendency:

Just do it, just take the leap and just do it! Seriously, if that is what you want to do. It is going to be a sacrifice. For me, yes, it was a sacrifice for me... But you know, I would not have traded this for anything in the world. It really has been an awesome year, except the last couple of months. We kind of just, whoa, we took a huge dip, but if it is really, really what you want to do, just take the leap of faith!

### **Summary**

In this chapter the stories of seven unique Mexican American female superintendents were portrayed. Each individual experience depicted seven different journeys in educational leadership. The personal demographics for each participant and the district demographics the districts that they lead were described in the chapter (see Table 1 & 2). Each exclusive story is a significant addition to the limited research on Mexican American female superintendents and is important to retell.

## V. ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

This study sought to elicit the voices of Mexican American female superintendents and to learn from their individual stories. The investigative process used a phenomenological method to examine their experiences through surveys, semi-structured interviews, observation, and researcher field notes. The process of identifying potential participants produced a population of 14 Mexican American female superintendents in the State of Texas. Seven of these women contributed to the study.

The research questions for this study were:

1. What have been the experiences of Mexican American women while seeking and operating within the superintendency?
2. What factors motivate Mexican American women to seek the superintendent position?
3. What strategies and supports are available to Mexican American females as they seek and retain a superintendent's position?

The previous chapter provided detailed descriptions of the women's backgrounds, accounts of their administrative careers and their experiences in obtaining and functioning in the position of superintendent were reported. The purpose of the narratives was to portray a complete and accurate account of each participant and convey a thorough understanding of their experiences; this allows the reader to see the essence of the phenomenon from the researcher's perspective (Creswell, 1998). The purpose of this chapter is to render the patterns, themes, and conclusions that emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data. This chapter is organized into two major sections, presentation and discussion of overriding themes.

## **Themes in Seeking and Operating the Superintendency**

This section discusses the responses to the three research questions. The first topic presents the experiences of Mexican American women while seeking and operating within the superintendency, including their motivation for seeking the superintendency. The second topic reports the strategies and support systems that were available for the women while seeking and retaining the superintendency. The analysis of data revealed common experiences in the processes of becoming a superintendent and sustaining the superintendency. This is the focus of the following section.

### **Experiences While Seeking the Superintendency**

The themes that were extracted from the detailed descriptions of the participants relate to specific phases in the search for the superintendency. The phases are: (a) superintendency as the goal, (b) motivation for seeking the superintendency, (c) interviewing for the superintendency, and (d) obtaining the superintendency. The location and types of school districts that Mexican American female superintendents lead was significant in the final analysis of data. Descriptions of these school districts are also presented in this section.

**Superintendency as the goal.** The women in this study had set the goal of pursuing the superintendency early in their administrative careers. Three of the seven women reached their ultimate goal of becoming a superintendent sooner than they had anticipated. Each participant carefully managed their organizational mobility in order to successfully navigate their progression to higher levels on the educational administrative career ladder as they acquired the necessary qualifications and skills needed for the superintendency. Gabriella stated, "I always knew I wanted to be a superintendent. I had

a bucket list...I was determined I was going to do that, that was always my goal.” Estrella set her goal for the superintendency when she was the curriculum director in a small west Texas school district. She stated “I discovered what kind of leader I was, because I was in the forefront...Those experiences added to me wanting to be a superintendent.” Elizabeth stated she knew early in her administrative career she would eventually seek the superintendent position and began to prepare herself for it:

I decided to go back to get my superintendency, thinking... you have to get certified by December 1999 to get grandfathered into the “old” life time certificate ...I did not want to have to renew (superintendent certification) every 5 years...I set that as my goal, and thought, I am going to get that done even though it might be ten years before I use it.

Each of the participants envisioned the superintendency as their ultimate career goal. They prepared themselves by obtaining the credentials needed for the superintendency and by fostering their administrative careers with the intent of gaining the essential aptitudes to achieve their ultimate career goal.

**Overcoming barriers.** It is a well-known fact that White males have historically dominated the superintendency (Brunner, 1999; Grogan, 1996; Kowalski, 2006; Tallerico, 2000 ). The literature disclosed that women must overcome barriers related to traditional sex-role stereotypes anytime they enter traditionally male dominated careers (Brunner, 1999, 2000, 2002; Blount, 1996; Grogan, 1996, 2005; Galloway, 2006; Tallerico, 2005). Mexican American women seeking the superintendency not only have had to overcome barriers related to gender but have also encountered challenges related to ethnicity biases

(Couch, 2007 and Gonzalez, 2007). The women in this study did not report encountering these barriers while specifically seeking a superintendency position but their stories revealed significant challenges related to gender and/or ethnicity as they advanced within the administrative hierarchy.

Estrella said; “The issue of being a Hispanic, and a women, and the youngest at central office, always kept coming up. I really did not let that bog me down.” Estrella described the blatant prejudicial challenges of being a Mexican American female working in a West Texas town in a high profile administrative position.

I began to receive hate mail, and then we had a bomb threat in one of the board meetings...the letter said ‘if you do not get rid of the Mexican we will get rid you.

It was an experience, it was a moment...I was able to get past it.

It is important to note that these sentiments came from members of the community and were not shared by her White male superintendent or the district’s school board members. Their support was significant in her ability to continue to progress within the administrative ladder.

Gabriella described the challenges she encountered as a high school principal under the supervision of a White male superintendent whom she referred to as “prejudiced.”

I had some very difficult times when I was a high school principal in [town] with the superintendent, because, one he was Anglo and prejudiced...Basically, I was female and it didn’t matter that we were at the very top.

Gabriella successfully led the high school in a positive direction, yet her superintendent continued to demonstrate biases towards her.

We went from academically acceptable to exemplary...we were taking kids, left and right to state competitions...we were doing well in sports, making it to the playoffs...no matter what I did, no matter how high we were, it was never enough...he thought he could badger me...he was determined that I was not good enough for the position.

Rachel described gender bias related to salary. She recounted her thoughts of being the only female assistant superintendent in a male dominated department. “There are three assistant superintendents, two are male and I am a female...yet, I make less money than my two counterparts...where is the justice in that...I am the lowest paid of all the administrators.”

Two of the women, Irma and Christina, did not divulge encountering these barriers in their advancement into the superintendency, nonetheless, they did disclose that they were working in school districts that had historically experienced “segregation” and had been “racist for so long” against certain minority groups. Christina also said:

I think people just began to overlook that I was Hispanic the fact that I was a women...I am the first women superintendent in this community in fact the first Hispanic.... this community was not about Hispanics especially women in bigger positions in an authority position.

**Perseverance and determination.** The women reported challenges early in their careers while furthering their education. The challenges included balancing life, work, school, and family. The women expressed traits of perseverance and determination which allowed them to gain the necessary credentials to continue their advancement towards the

superintendency. All seven participants maintained their aspirations and eventually accomplished their goal.

Rita shared her experiences of attending graduate school as a single mother, living with traditional grandparents. She expressed the challenges of being a caretaker to her elderly grandparents, working, attending school, and trying to have some sort of social life.

I was struggling, because I took care of my grandparents, I was divorced, I had two jobs, and I had a son...but, I was blessed...that I went from the bottom all the way to the top. I needed to get out and my grandmother did not like for me to date to go out, because I was divorced...the only way I could get out of the house was to go to school, *ya era viejota*, I drove twice a week after work to [campus]. It was my outlet, my social life.

Gabriella also shared her experience of being a single parent while attending graduate school. Her inspiration was the desire to be a role model for her children and her determination of pursuing the superintendency.

I had four kids, got divorced, so I was a single parent for a very long time...I had to work two jobs...I would teach during the day and then I would attend college in the evenings... I was determined...it took me forever to get my master's degree...five years and then the opportunity came along with a doctoral program...I was already with my now husband, I still had kids at home...so I took that on...at that time I was a high school principal. It was very difficult, 'cause I was taking nine hours and still working long hours.

Irma, while still an undergraduate student, knew she would eventually pursue her doctorate degree. She shared her challenges of meeting that goal after getting married, having young children, and working as an administrator.

I started my doctorate when I had a newborn and a two year old and I completed my doctorate when my third child was born...if you have the will and desire to complete it, it is possible. The biggest challenge was having to go to [campus-out of town] to take courses. I remember when I started I thought how are we going to do this.

Four of the participants, Rita, Gabriella, Irma, and Estrella each earned their doctorate degrees. Isabell began to pursue her doctorate degree, but then the opportunity for a second superintendency presented itself and she chose to leave the doctoral program to devote her energies to the superintendency. Catherine and Rachel were the only two participants who had not pursued their doctorate degrees. Each of the seven participants was determined in their pursuit of the superintendency and their perseverance ultimately paid off.

**Interviewing for the superintendency.** Amazingly, five of the women obtained their first position after only having one interview for the position. Three of those women, Isabel, Rita, and Catherine expressed that they were not actively seeking the superintendency, but when the opportunity for the position presented itself, they jumped in and took advantage of it. Isabel and Irma reached their goals much sooner than expected when their supervising superintendent, both White females, recommended them for a vacancy and encouraged them to take the position. For Gabriella and Rachel their attainment of the superintendency took a little more initiative. Attaining the position

required their willingness to relocate to a different area, however, they limited their search to school districts in the central and southern regions of the state. Rachel and Gabriella were the only two superintendents that did not have a mentor or sponsor during their search for the superintendency. After submitting several applications to different school districts, the two women were successful in obtaining a superintendent's position.

### **Obtaining the Superintendency**

Each woman first established herself in educational administration by obtaining the necessary skills needed for the superintendency and moving up the organizational career ladder. They reported their willingness to take the opportunity of accepting the role of the superintendency if and when it presented itself, not being sure if another opportunity would come along. This included the flexibility to “jump” into the new role and for some this included the necessity, willingness and ability to relocate. Christina said, “I jumped in and I did it, and I don't regret it at all.” Isabel stated, “I was not even looking for a job...it just happened by chance, that you know somebody kinda just pushed me into it for experience sake.”

**Just do it.** Their attitude of “just doing it” exemplifies their willingness and fearlessness to take risks when moving forward into the role of the superintendency. Rita recalled, “It takes a very strong person that is willing to take that risk.” Gabriella said, “You have to not be afraid to pick up and leave, lock, stock, and barrel.”

Estrella prepared herself for the superintendent search and intentionally sought out superintendent positions in “low performing” school districts.

I thought I don't need someone else to determine when I am ready. So, I found one troubled district and I prepared myself... I applied for one superintendency. I interviewed, I got it, and it was my first superintendency.

Irma was not actively seeking the superintendency when the opportunity became available. Irma had gradually moved up the career ladder in her current school district and had established herself as an effective district leader. When the superintendent's position became available in that district, she applied and was selected. She had the support and sponsorship from her predecessor who recommended Irma as her replacement to the district's school board members. Irma said:

Out of the blue one day, I start getting information regarding how to run a board meeting in my drop box. I start taking it home to read and I am like OK this isn't by fluke...She [superintendent] is requesting a leave of absence and at the same time she has already put her plan in place...how to transition without the school district missing a beat... she is also providing a recommendation as who to place as an interim...I think it got dropped on my lap prematurely...when it was all said and done I ended up in the superintendent role...the only one I had applied for.

Rita's experience of obtaining her first superintendency is a peculiar story. She was not actively seeking the superintendency and was astounded to find out that she was being sought out for a possible superintendent position. A private investigator had contacted her husband in an attempt to locate Rita. The investigator informed her husband that two board members from a small rural school district were interested in meeting Rita, with the possibility of offering her the superintendent position. When the bewildering opportunity for the superintendency presented itself Rita seized it.

I wasn't seeking the superintendency. I am a retired rehire...they [school board members] had heard of me and they were impressed with me. They wanted me to be the superintendent. They had done their research and they found me... I met with them... I got the job, and when you think it about it, here you are retired, you go back in the trenches as a high school principal and out of nowhere they offer you this job... so I said Hell yeah, not only yeah, but Hell yes!

Isabel had goals of becoming a superintendent and was quickly moving up the career ladder with her district. She explained that she was not expecting to apply for a superintendent position but, when her superintendent told her to complete an application packet as an internship assignment, and the packet was submitted to a hiring school district without her knowledge, she was amazed that she was being considered for the position. This unplanned turn of events, lead to her first superintendency. She said:

They [search consultant] ended up taking it [application] to the board for consideration...I was selected for an interview... I end up going to the interview...There's people with a lot of experience. I am a rookie... I am thinking I have no chance at all... I pick up the phone it's the search consultant telling me they are offering me the job... I realized how long it would take for me to be a superintendent where I'm at...this district is willing to give me that opportunity now... do it now and just be brave and go for it.

Rachel had to exert more initiative in her pursuit of the superintendency. Her ultimate goal had been to serve as the superintendent in her home town. After working in that district for over 30 years, and gradually moving up the administrative career ladder, the superintendent's position became available. However, when she was not selected for

the position, she realized she might not be able to reach her original goal, so she opted to pursue the superintendency in other school districts. After her second interview for a superintendent position, she was able to attain the superintendency elsewhere. She said:

I applied in all different districts whatever was available and low and behold I ran across this district and I went through the interview process and here I am today...I had been at that district 31 years. I have always lived in this community. ... but, if my work and everything I have done is not going to be valued...I needed to go somewhere else. So leaving was a huge leap of faith.

Each superintendent had obtained the necessary qualifications needed for the superintendency as they progressed through their administrative careers. They each demonstrated a strong sense of self-efficacy, the willingness to take risks in their quest for the superintendency, and were confident in their ability to take on the role of the superintendency .

**Leap of faith.** Five of the seven participants had the ability to relocate to where the job was and received support from their families when they had to move. Irma and Catherine were the only participants from the study who had remained in the same district throughout their administrative careers, including their ultimate position as superintendent. They did not have to relocate when they accepted the superintendent position. They also had sustained longevity in the superintendent position, 11 years for Catherine and ten years for Irma. Gabriela's superintendent position was located approximately 15 miles away from her hometown, so she commuted back and forth daily. The remaining four participants moved to the town where their school districts were located. For Rita and Estrella this meant leaving their husbands behind because of their

established professional careers in their hometowns. Isabel was able to move her children with her throughout all three of her superintendencies. Her husband was not able to move with her for the first superintendency, because he was at the outset of building his business. However, by the time she was offered her second and third positions, he had successfully established his business and was able to relocate with the family.

The participants shared how it is useful to have the capability of moving to new locations when seeking the superintendency, but also acknowledged that this is a challenge for women, especially women with children. Gabriella said, “You have to be able to be mobile, if you want to get ahead. Just like men are mobile and they can go from here to there.”

Rachel was the only unmarried participant and she had the flexibility of moving when the superintendent position was offered. Even though she was not married and did not have children, she discussed how moving from her hometown was still difficult for her. “I did not have kids, nothing...I never expected to leave, so leaving was a big deal.” Rachel expressed the necessity of making the “sacrifice” of moving to where the job is.

I can tell you in talking to some of my friends, they are afraid to take that leap of faith...they are afraid to leave their communities...there are very few people who say ‘Hey I am leaving and I am going somewhere else’...if this is really what you want to do just take the leap of faith, if you have to move *poz* you gotta move...that is the biggest sacrifice that anybody would have to make.

### **Motivation for Seeking the Superintendency**

The participants of this study all expressed their motives for seeking the superintendency as an opportunity to impact and improve educational opportunities for

all children because they wanted to “make a difference” and do “what is best for children.” One of the themes that was revealed was their dedication and commitment to working with students.

### **Improving Educational Opportunities**

A common vision that existed among the women was making systematic changes to “troubled,” “broken,” or “shattered” school districts. They each expressed their dedication and commitment in improving educational opportunities for students in school districts that had experienced low student performance because of ineffective school systems. The participants had strong backgrounds in curriculum and each one of them expressed their confidence in their ability to improve educational programs for all students. Rita said, “I will tell you I am good at what I do when it comes to curriculum I know what to do.” Gabriella stated, “I had excellent curriculum experience...I know what I am doing.”

Estrella said, “I found one troubled district...they were academically unacceptable...I just tweaked a few things and we were able to turn it around.”

Rachel described the drastic changes that needed to occur in her district to be able to improve student performance and meet state accountability standards.

Coming into the district it wasn't broken, it was shattered, it was not to the point that we could grab pieces and try to glue them together. It was literally knocking it down completely and starting from scratch... I am glad to say for all the things we did...even though the district has been cited for three years by TEA...we finally got a letter clearing us.

All of the superintendents shared examples of having to make changes with staff members who were not effectively improving instruction for all children. Some shared their examples of confronting school board members when having to make comprehensive changes to pre-existing systematic problems that did not meet the needs of students.

Irma talked about the expectations she required from all of her district staff members:

I always tell folks you make decisions in the best interest of kids, regardless of the pressures that come along with it. You are here to represent kids and do what is in their best interest...that has to remain at the central point of everything that we do.

Rachel spoke of coping with school board members whose focus tended to stray away from making sound decisions centered on the overall interest of students. She said, “We [administrative cabinet] worked very hard to establish our relationships and getting them [school board members] to focus on education. It's about the kids, it's about the kids, you know making decisions for the kids and by the kids.”

Gabriella shared her perception on differences between male and female superintendents concerning child centered leadership, “You don't hear a male superintendent say, I want to do what is best for the children or have the sense of urgency that women do.”

Each participant spoke of removing staff members because of their inefficiency or inability to fulfill the job requirements. These were difficult decisions for them, but were necessary in order to provide the expected quality of instruction for all students. Each

superintendent shared that these were non-negotiable expectations for administrators, teachers, and all staff members.

Irma said, “You are not going to keep everybody happy. You have to be a risk taker to create change and with change and risk taking comes differences of opinion. That is OK and you gotta be comfortable with that.”

Estrella shared her disappointment of confronting educators who were not willing to make change for the sake of improving the educational experiences of all students. She said, “People in positions that they have a sense of entitlement to, as opposed to, I am here to help students are challenging.”

Catherine described the administrative changes that have occurred during her superintendency and she communicated the importance of hiring other administrators who share her philosophy about education.

Over the years I have been able to hire administrators... I knew that there were some administrators that I was not willing to continue working with in this district. I did what I had to do to make sure they went on their merry way...I was very fortunate to bring in administrators of my choosing... and really make sound decisions for children.

### **Strategies and Support While Seeking the Superintendency**

The analysis of data corroborated the literature which reported that the strategies that Mexican American women applied when seeking the superintendency involved utilizing mentorship, sponsorship, and social-capital (Mendez-Morse, 1997; Ortiz, 1999; Quilantan, 2002). Ortiz (2001) defined social capital as the ability to establish trust within influential networks by structuring strong connections with other professionals and

developing cooperation through structures of personal relationships with family and community members.

Each participant reported having extensive social capital which included professional networks and/or community and family members. Gabriella, Rachel, and Rita reported that they did not have a formal mentor during their search for the superintendency. Instead, they relied on perseverance, family, and community members as part of their support system in their search for the superintendency. The ability to relocate was instrumental in some of the participants' ability to accept the superintendency.

**Mentorship and/or sponsorship.** Receiving support from individuals, whether it was formal or informal, was influential in the progression of the participants' career paths, eventually giving them access to the superintendency. Some of the women in the study communicated that they were able to receive support from a mentor as they sought the superintendency. This included colleagues, White female and male superintendents, Hispanic male superintendents, and friends. These mentors were both formal and informal mentors. Only one of the participants spoke of having another Mexican American female superintendent from whom she sought advice, and considered her not only a mentor but a friend as well.

For the purpose of this study, mentorship and sponsorship are considered similar but two separate methods of support. Kowalski (2006) differentiated between the definitions of mentorship and sponsorship. He defined mentorship as receiving encouragement, career related advice, friendship, and the development of confidence and trust from a person or persons to another individual seeking mentoring. He defined sponsorship as the creation of professional opportunities for others by creating

opportunities that help overcome social and political barriers for certain members of a group. Irma and Isabel disclosed that receiving assistance from a sponsor, White female superintendents, who were instrumental in connecting them with either a search consultant or personally recommending them to school board members was critical to their success in obtaining the superintendency.

**Mentors.** The women in the study reported soliciting advice from multiple mentors. These Mexican American females were able to rely on quality mentors who deliberately connected them to information that was exclusive to the superintendency and was useful in their pursuit to obtain the superintendency.

Estrella's strategy in her quest for the superintendency consisted of preparing for her search by soliciting advice from others. She shared that she had received mentoring from her assistant superintendent and superintendent, both White males, while in West Texas. She considered them "visionaries" and said they gave her the "opportunity to learn how systems work." When it was time for her to begin her search, she relied on advice from two women. One of the women that she mentioned was her college mentor, a White female. The other was a friend who was a Mexican American female superintendent whom she had come to know at conferences that they both had attended. In addition to these two women, she talked about a Hispanic male who encouraged her to continue to pursue her goals.

I prepared myself and I asked some of my colleagues how do you get ready for this? ... I have people I relied on. I picked up the phone and I am not embarrassed to ask questions... she [college mentor] brought up some very good points. I took her advice...I had another mentor... and older guy [Hispanic male]...he said,

‘you know most people think you are supposed to be ready to take any position, no one goes into any position knowing everything’ and that always stayed with me.

Rachel had support from her colleagues and community members when she sought the superintendency in her district, but when she did not get the position she described how they expressed their dissatisfaction with the school board’s decision not to hire her.

I had colleagues that would tell me you really need to become a superintendent. You need to leave [town]. When I did not get the job...the community was upset that they did not give me the superintendency...man the newspaper tore up the school board like you wouldn’t, believe ‘cause I had always been the one to lead the charges...people knew my work.

When Rachel began her search with other school districts she relied on the same colleagues and community members for support in her search. She shared that when she was being considered for her current position, two board members went to her home town and spoke to colleagues and community members about her experience. Her reputation as an effective leader was shared which had an impact on their decision to select her for the superintendent position. She told how one of the current school board members, a White female, was initially was not in favor of selecting her but after the two board members had visited with her previous colleagues and community mentors, she voted in favor of selecting her. “They visited my district...my campuses were recognized, exemplary, so they knew my work...actually she [white board member], at first was against picking me. When they took the vote it ended up being a 7/0 vote.

**Sponsors: Women empowering women.** The lack of mentoring for Mexican American women at the superintendency level limits the possibilities of connecting with superintendent search consultants and hiring school districts (Tallerico, 2000). Isabel and Irma spoke of the training that they received from their supervising White female superintendents. These sponsors initiated the superintendent search for both of their mentees and both Isabel and Irma talked about the influence that their White female superintendents had in their ability to access the superintendency.

Isabel's superintendent provided her with the necessary tools to begin her search by providing her the opportunity to connect with the "gatekeepers" of the superintendency, the search consultants (Kamler and Skakeshaft, 1999, p. 51).

My superintendent, who was the first female superintendent I had ever had in my school, so when I did my internship, it was under her...she said 'this is your last project...I want you to just prepare for it...put it in a little portfolio and bring it to me'...well, she actually submitted it to the search consultants and she knew these people. She had been a superintendent, so she asked them to review it and give me feedback.

Irma was placed as the interim superintendent with the recommendation from her superintendent who had taken a leave of absence. In addition, Irma was highly encouraged by her superintendent to apply for the position when she eventually resigned, and highly recommended that Irma be considered as her permanent replacement.

The superintendent that had been here before me had been here for nine years. She served as a role model and a real mentor...I was blessed to have a superintendent that was able to see not only the day to day work, but the

difference that I was able make with individuals...she had the forethought of how to systematically transition the district...she told the school board members, 'you would be crazy not to hire her.'

**Loss of mentorship.** All of the participants in the study had extensive support systems in place while seeking the superintendency, and which continued on after obtaining the position. However, once in the superintendency there was a lack of mentorship available to them. Rachel said, "I really don't have a mentor here." Catherine echoed, "Oh wow, I wish I could tell you I had a mentor in another school district to turn to, but absolutely not. I do not have anybody."

Isabel shared her dilemma with balancing work and motherhood as a result of the high demands of the superintendency. She sought out other Mexican American female superintendents for mentorship and discovered that there was a significant absence of representation from this group.

I went to a conference and I thought I am going to meet a lot of people like me. I looked around and I could not see anyone like me, and at that time in 2000 there were only like eight of us [Mexican American female superintendents] in the whole state...I joined the Texas Council for Women School Executives so I could meet people like me, but most of them were White females. I was very young at that time, most of them were close to retirement...I could not talk to them about what to do about my kids...am I going to traumatize them because I am dragging them from one district to another...I would have liked to have someone to talk to about how to handle the personal side of it.

**Social capital.** Putman (1995) defines social capital as “the features of social organizations, such as networks, norms, and social trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (p. 67). The participants of this study had established an extensive network throughout their administrative career from which they utilized as they sought and obtained the superintendency. These networks included, school board members, community members, co-workers, and family.

Catherine is one participant that had an extensive network system within her community. She took advantage of the social capital that she had established in her ascension into the superintendency. She had built her administrative career in one school district and had established a reputation as an effective district leader, and the district’s school board members recognized her ability to lead the school district. She also had grown up in the same area and was familiar with the community members and the needs of the community. Her strategy in employing social capital was demonstrated with these words:

I was working here as the assistant superintendent. I knew a lot of the parents in the community because I had gone to school with them here...they [school board members] said, ‘we want you to do this job.’ I have to tell you that quite honestly my number one skill or trait is customer service. I have a phenomenal reputation for PR [public relationships] and I had a school board that absolutely adored me...I was hired...I became superintendent and I have enjoyed my job...I guess I was their little security blanket.

The contextual factors for Catherine resulted in her ability to use social capital to form a professional networking system. She has situated herself as an effective

superintendent, which has resulted in her being sought out by other school board members to work in their school districts. However, she is happy with her current role and is not interested in going elsewhere.

I have been asked many times to apply at other districts. I've been called so many times and I just think it's funny. ...I've got board members from other districts saying 'you really need to apply with us' ...the increase in salary would be phenomenal, but I am not willing to do this job anywhere else. I am absolutely happy and satisfied.

Catherine has successfully utilized the resources that became available to her from school board members and professional networking.

The other participants in the study also were able to establish social capital in their communities. Ortiz (2001) discussed the importance of personal relationships and strong networks in sustaining communities. Aspects of social capital include trust, cooperation, and collective action which serve as resources for individuals. This relates to Hanifan's concept of social capital (as cited in Putman, 1995) that community problems can be solved by strengthening the networks of solidarity among individuals by producing an accumulation of social capital.

Irma had established herself in the community where she continued to progress throughout her administrative career. She said, "I think when you remain in the same community it can work for you...depending on the success you have and the relationships you have kept, because along the way there are some tough decisions that have to be made."

Isabel, who is in her third superintendency, has been able to develop professional networking relationships but also has established trusting relationships in the communities that she has served. She spoke of her current community and disclosed part of the social capital that she has been able to build comes from other parents in the community which became a support mechanism for balancing work and family obligations.

I would say that in the community it is a very family atmosphere whether it is in the work place, or extended into the family...the kids [Isabel's] are involved in the activities. As they grow up with other kids involved in the same activities you form relationships and acquaintances with different families and everyone has needs at different times...it is not uncommon to help moms from other families...So that becomes part of the support system. The community becomes part of the support system.

The importance of establishing social capital, according to Ortiz (2001), is that the superintendent, school board members, and the community hold each other responsible for the successful delivery of educational services. It was essential for the Mexican American superintendents to build strong community relations by utilizing social capital. These Mexican American women have been able to contribute their unique traits, associated with their personal experiences and cultural influences, and in turn have become an additional resource to the pre-existing social capital of their community and school district.

## **Strategies and Support While Operating the Superintendency**

The superintendency can be a lonely and isolated position (Couch, 2007). Learning to cope with the high demands of the job and having support systems in place was imperative for the Mexican American female superintendents' ability to perform optimally in their role. Rita said, "When working as hard as you are, there is no balance in your life...you totally ignore yourself and your family because you become so ingrained in your work." Irma said, "You always keep in perspective that you have to balance both ends." The participants spoke of a variety of support systems that sustained them while in the superintendent role. Family was the most common form of support that the superintendents spoke of.

**Family.** Each participant provided examples of strong family support which included spouses, parents, grandparents, siblings, and extended family. Six of the participants were married and they all spoke of their spouse's support both as they sought out the superintendent position and while in the position. Rita, who was single, described having support from her parents and siblings. They all spoke of the impact that their family members had on their lives and how assistance from family members was vital for them when coping with stresses related to the job, and balancing life and work.

Isabel shared that strong support from family members which included, her sister, mother, and, husband sustained her throughout her three separate superintendent positions. She discussed receiving support from her husband as she sought out each position. She was able to relocate for all three of her superintendencies, which meant moving her children to new locations. When she spoke of her husband she said, "He's

always been very supportive...if it had not been for family support...I don't think I could have made it.”

Rita and Estrella shared how their husbands supported their decision to stay in the school district during the calendar school year. They spoke of traveling back home on weekends, and when they could not get away their husbands would make the trip to come visit them. Estrella said, “My husband...he lives in [large city]. We live in [city] but I stay here during the week, sometimes I go to Austin or he comes here.”

Irma gave numerous examples of family support which included backing from her husband, parents, in-laws, and her children, as they've grown older.

My husband's family lives in [large city], so if push comes to shove, if we really have something that both of us need to be at we can call his family...I have a 17 year old that drives at this point he becomes part of my support to help with the younger siblings.

Rita relied on her husband to help as she struggled to assert herself in the superintendent role. She said, “Before, I swear it used to hurt. I cried, now I don't cry. It doesn't hurt. I toughened up, my husband helped.”

**Social capital.** The women had cultivated social capital and extensive support systems throughout their administrative careers. These established personal relationships based on trust and cooperation remained intact after obtaining the superintendency. All the women were able to acquire additional social capital and networking systems once they attained the superintendency. These support mechanisms included encouragement from coworkers, community members, and school board members.

Irma shared that her involvement as an administrator over a 20 year period allowed her to be “embedded” in the community.

Over time you’re able to establish relationships. You are able to understand the culture of community and really be embedded as a member of the community...I had three kids that have come through the system. I have been able to develop relationships not only the professional side of my career but also being a parent in the community. I think it has provided me an opportunity to look at what we do education-wise, through different lenses and different perspectives and helped us improve what we do daily.

Rachel had hired “key players” to work on her administrative cabinet. “My support is my coworkers. I had a very good cabinet that I brought in, good people from across the state...we worked hard to move the district... I knew I could count on them.” She also had developed relationships with community members who were familiar with the customary “politics” of certain board members. When the “bickering” among school board members began to interfere with her ability to continue making systematic changes to the “broken systems” community members demonstrated their support and offered advice. “People were telling me this happens every May... keep your head low, so you don’t get targeted...don’t take sides *mieja* you are doing a great job.” Rachel expressed that although the advice she received was well intended, she could not avoid the conflicts that had occurred and her commitment was to continue to work on improving instruction for the “kids.”

Catherine described how her fellow administrators, school board members and community members were part of her support system.

I have been very successful because I have had the opportunity to hire most of the administrators around me...they have stayed with the district for many years. I have been able to work with fantastic people. I have a great job. I have a fantastic school board I have surrounded myself with very brilliant people and with the same philosophy that I have...I attribute my success to the people that I work with, because they have made things a lot easier for me. I have a great relationship with his school board.

**Redefinition of self.** Mexican American women experience phases of redefining themselves as they progress through their administrative careers. After obtaining the superintendent position, they claim the superintendency as part of their identity and form a new definition of themselves as “being a minority women responsible for leading the district” (Mendez-Morse, 1997, p. 9). The data from this study confirmed this concept, as some of the women discussed having gone through a phase of “redefinition of self” after unexpectedly getting the superintendent position. This included changing self-perceptions as viewing themselves as potential superintendents to asserting their competence as superintendents. All participants professed themselves as empowered women fully capable of navigating the bold role of the superintendency. This sense of empowerment and confidence demonstrated their perservere and determination in reaching their goals after encountering challenging experiences throughout their formative years and educational careers. Rachel said, “My head is held high...The day they ask me to do something I am not suppose to, that is when we need to part ways. That is who I am”. Irma said,

Along the way there are some tough decisions that have to be made and you are not going to keep everybody happy....with change and risk taking comes differences of opinion, and that is OK and you gotta be comfortable with that.

Catherine also said,

I wasn't too excited about it, but I jumped in and I did it, and I don't regret it at all...I have learned to rub a lot of salt on my skin because I have learned to become very callus in many ways because of many decisions that I've had to make.

**Gaining control.** Through their conversations Rita and Gabriella disclosed experiencing additional phases of redefining themselves. They experienced “control” from some members of the school board at the beginning of their superintendency. Rita said, “I come in *toda sonsa* [stupidly], superintendent at my age, *nombre que suerte* [what luck]. I was very happy...they wanted a puppet and I was the “perfect puppet” Gabriella said, “I don't know if they hired me because I was qualified or they hired me because they thought they would be able to control me... I tried to avoid a lot of things.”

**Asserting themselves.** Rita and Gabriela were confident in their capacity to lead their school districts and realized that they needed to stop allowing themselves to be subjected to what they perceived as control by specific members of the board. They asserted themselves in their role and began to claim for themselves the role and responsibilities of chief executive of a school district. Rita said, “*De defiendes* [you start to defend yourself] you know...I came to the realization that you need to stop being a puppet... I said wait a minute...I am not totally stupid...I am still there.” Gabriella said,

The first year and a half was the honeymoon, I tried to be positive, tried to tell them what they wanted to hear. If they thought they were going to hire me and control me boy were they very far off.

**Claiming the role.** Rita expresses confidence in her skills by saying, “Right now my scores are very good, the rigor is so enormous, but I will tell you, I am good at what I do, when it comes to curriculum.” Gabriela said, “I know what I am doing leave me alone. I will get you to where we need to go...I knew what to do to get ahead and we had some significant gains.”

**Superintendent school board relations.** All seven participants spoke of the impact that their superintendent- school board relationships had on the quality of their role. Their ability to successfully make effective systematic changes needed for improving student performance was attributed to the type of relationship they had with all members of the school board. Five of the participants spoke of having “trust” from their current school board members and receiving “support” when making difficult decisions. Gabriella said,

What motivates me in this district is that we have a very good board at the point where they want only good things for the schools and they have been so supportive this year, if I had a board that was not supportive, I would not stay.

Irma said, “I think that I am blessed to work with a board that understands the importance of staying focused on kids.” “Absolutely,” was Catherine’s response to whether her school board members have supported any changes she has had to make throughout her 11 years as superintendent.

Rachel shared the challenges she was encountering with school board members and how those challenges interfered with her ability to continue to make effective changes to a “shattered” system.

By April it was just full blown politics. I mean they forgot about the kids forgot about everything, it all became me...the board had been very supportive and then politics happened, it is no longer about we, so right at this point in time we are stuck in the mud.

Rita spoke of the difficult confrontations she experienced with specific school board members during her first two years with the school district. These confrontations were challenging for her but she persevered and worked through these challenges with support from her husband. She shared that her relationship with the school board had changed and when asked who she relied on for support regarding managerial decisions she responded “I have my board, the new board.” At the time of the interview she felt that she had been able to develop support from new board members.

I speak in the past because things have dramatically changed...I don't even know what to say the board switched from them being in power ...so she quit the board...I was in hog heaven, yes, then comes the elections in November and it switches. Now it is a 4/3 ...the ones that did not like me are not in power...they gave me a new 2 year contract when these other people were trying to get rid of me.

There were no Mexican American female superintendents in the northern or eastern regions of the state. Given that no Mexican American female superintendent has been selected to serve in a school district in these areas of the State, one can speculate

that school board members are not considering Mexican American women as prospective candidates for the superintendency in these areas. However, it is not evident whether Mexican American women in those areas are actively seeking the position and encountering barriers.

### **Overriding Themes in Personal Experiences**

The intent of this study was to render the accounts and experiences of the participants as fully and as faithfully as possible. Patton (2002) states “people viewing qualitative findings through different paradigmatic lenses will react differently, just as researchers vary in how we think about what we do when we study the world” (p. 543). I am aware that this report intersects with my perspective of the experiences, hence the renditions of what was learned are the interpretations of the researcher’s assessment of the data. The central themes that were revealed include racism, cultural congruency, gender stereotypes, district appeal, and school board politics. The final analysis of data also uncovered patterns within each prominent theme that was related to personal attributes that each of the participants shared. The common attributes were self-efficacy and confidence, risk taking traits, and determination and perseverance.

#### **Racism**

Historically Mexican American’s have experienced discrimination in the United States, and Texas has a sustained history of longstanding customary beliefs that have led to discriminatory practices against Mexican Americans (Samora & Simon, 1977). The theoretical framework for this study was grounded in a feminist perspective incorporating Chicana feminist ideologies ( Garcia, 1997; Hurtado, 1989). Chicana feminist thought maintains that for “women of color, race, class, and gender subordination is experienced

simultaneously” and that Mexican American women encounter oppression by members of their own group and by Whites of both genders ( Hurtado, p. 839).

Each of the participants in this study described encounters with customary racism and ethnicity preconceptions at some point in their lives either in their formative years and/or during their educational careers. Catherine said, “I am right in the middle of a community that was racist for so long...it used to be all about the Anglos.” Rita, when speaking of the community where she is currently the superintendent of schools said, “Prejudice still exists , *hay mucho Mexicana probé y ignórate* [ignorant and poor]...for those of who say it does not exist, they are lying, it exists.”

Estrella’s story of receiving “hate mail” and a “bomb threat” was the most overt example of experiencing prejudices because of her ethnicity and working in a community that differed from her cultural background.

It was somewhat painful...I am Mexican, that's all there is to it...I knew that there were people like that in the town....but, it shocked me that here we are in 2000 something and they are still doing that<sup>5</sup>.

**Educational oppression.** Chicano students have experienced persistent language suppression and cultural segregation (Valencia, 1991). The institutional practice of restricting the use of Spanish as a curricular vehicle was “intended to ensure the dominance of the English language and Anglo culture”(p. 6). Estrella and Rita shared their experiences within an educational system that failed to adequately meet their needs as second language learners. Estrella said, “I went into a total emersion classroom in high

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<sup>5</sup> The location of this school district (North/Western Panhandle)was relevant to the results of the study. There has not been a Mexican American female superintendent selected to serve in this region of the State.

school. I had been in Mexico...the 7th grade and I was already taking physics and chemistry and then I go to California and they have me reading pre-primers.” Rita described her experience of being a Spanish speaker in a school that did not provide instructional accommodations for second language learners. She recounted significant events that impacted her educational experiences:

I was labeled mentally retarded, yeah, I was a leftie and they switched me to the right. My grandmother made me use my right hand because ‘la gente, el diablo’, so yeah...my first language was Spanish. There was no bilingual education then, it did not exist...so, I believed that I was retarded...so I started acting like that [she laughs]. Then they call my mother and my grandmother to the school and to tell them...my grandmother, se levantó, mi abuelita, y dijo, la única retardada aquí es usted! Mi nieta no tiene nada y la voy a sacar de aquí, [she got up, my grandmother, and said, the only retarded one is you, there is nothing wrong with my granddaughter. I am taking her out of here].

The obstacles related to language and the educational inequalities that the women encountered impacted their desire to work with school districts that matched their cultural experiences and was the motivating factor for their quest to pursue the superintendency.

**Segregation.** All of the respondents acknowledged working in school districts that have historically experienced segregation based on ethnicity and social class. The superintendents spoke of encountering issues related to the historical segregation and the educational injustices as a result of the past segregation policies.

Irma shared her experience of working in a school district that is slowly overcoming the issues that are associated with past injustices of segregating Hispanic and African American students.

Our community has experienced several years of segregation that had taken place and it influences and impacts generations of families as a result of those experiences...you know of different parts of town that allowed service to Whites only and not to minorities. Educationally there were also divisions where Hispanics went to school, where the Blacks went to school and Whites....by the time the Hispanics reached 6th grade their education ended there. They went out to the fields to work and did not continue with their high school years....we have kids that come through our system who are being raised by grandparents in a number of cases who did not complete or have the opportunity to go all the way through high school...there are some kids in our community that are right now at the starting point where my grandparents were 30 years ago.

Estrella shared her experience with segregation when working as an administrator in West Texas.

We were going towards a direction to make things happen for children ...we re-did the attendance zone to racially balance the entire district which was a real undertaking. We were able to recruit a number of Hispanic administrators and teachers. We were able to clear an old segregation lawsuit that had been hanging over us for 20 years.

## **Cultural Congruency**

Hofstede (2010) defines culture as the “collective programming of the mind that distinguishes members of one group or category of people from others” (p. 7). The social environment cultivates and shapes an individual’s identity and that cultural analysis is the understanding of shared basic norms (Hofstede, 2010; Schein, 1992). Hofstede presents four dimensions in his characterization of culture: power distance, collectivism versus individualism, femininity versus masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance. Power distance is defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (p. 61). In a collectivist society “the interest of the group prevails over the interest of the individual” (p. 90). Social roles based on gender exist in all societies and the culture of the society determines whether the culturally determined roles are defined as masculine or feminine. In general “men are supposed to be assertive, competitive and tough. Women are supposed to be more concerned with taking care of the home, of the children, and take the tender roles” (p. 138) .

**Gender differences: Power and “control.”** The conversations with some of the participants revealed challenges related to gender as a result of working with school districts that reflected their own cultural backgrounds, and working with district school boards whose members were mostly Hispanic men. Mexican American women have overcome the challenge of the traditional sex-role expectations that have been governed for many years by culture and tradition (Quilantan & Ochoa, 2004). The men had the power and the women were expected to accept the value system created by men and display a subservient role (Anzaldua, 1987). Although these gender challenges continue

to exist in the Hispanic culture, the modern Latina has evolved from the stereo-typical submissive role to a more assertive and confident role and the participants of this study exemplified this modern Mexicana.

Gabriella spoke of her first superintendency with a Hispanic male dominated school board:

I was very apprehensive because you are talking about all Hispanic men, and I knew that some of those males were going to have some issues you know, adhering to certain things I would have to say...if they thought they were going to hire me and control me, boy were they very far off.

Estrella shared her approach with the school board members during her interview for her current superintendent position.

So I walk in there, in the board room and I saw that they were all Hispanic. The head hunter had told me, 'they are going to be watching you...this is a formal interview, don't ask anything until they ask you.' I just ignored him. I went in there and I shook everyone's hand. He was just looking at me, 'you are not supposed to do that,' but that's who I am...I was prepared for all their questions and I was candid.

**Gender roles.** Anzaldua (2006) claimed that Mexican American women are considered selfish when they do not surrender to traditional role expectations. She asserted that in the Mexican American culture, "if you do not behave like everyone else, *la gente*, will say, *que te crees grande*," [the people will say you think you're better than others] (p. 17). Nieto (1997) claimed that the Catholic church had a great influence on gender expectations of the Chicano culture and defined "women's role as that of wife and

mother, requiring obedience to one's husband" (p. 208). The women in this study defy the traditional Mexican American sex-role stereotypes and affirmed themselves in what has been a traditional "male occupation," reflecting Tallerico and Blount's (2004) assertion that the role of the superintendent has traditionally "been defined and institutionalized as men's work" (p.642).

Estrella said:

I have a very supportive husband who understands long hours...usually I come home I don't cook or anything. I depend on them [husband and children] to take care of a lot of things around the house. He understands and embraces it. He understands that in order for me to be successful, he needs to help.

Rachel described her experience as a young girl and how her play was not what some may not consider traditional girl's play.

I played the *canicas* [marbles] and hiding go seek...I grew up skinning deer and hyenas. I worked on motors...my dad was like you gotta learn how to change your tire, how to change you oil. I actually knew how to hotwire a car back then

**Collectivism.** Mexican American girls are traditionally raised with collectivist ideals where her sense of self is based on her affiliation and responsibility to the other members of the group and not on her own personal achievement ( Trumball, Rothstein, Greenfield, & Quiroz, 2001). The participants often spoke of their responsibilities to other members of their groups. They expressed that they wanted to "do what was best" for children by working as a "team" and collaborating with colleagues, school board members, and community members.

Rachel spoke of the importance of team work and remaining focused on the needs of the community and not on self:

We worked as a team, everything was a team effort, no one did anything in isolation...this is what we need to attack...then politics happened...I mean they [school board] forgot about the kids ,forget about everything. It all became about me, me, and me. It was no longer about we.

Irma shared her experience of wearing “two hats in the community” those of superintendent and parent, and how she has “embedded” herself in her community.

I would say that in the community it is a very family atmosphere...you form relationships with different families and everyone has needs at different times...so we help each other at different times.... I go watch my kid’s activities, but I also make it a point to go be a part of the other functions, to go watch others, the other kids, and showing that support...in this role, it is important to communicate the sense of importance of family and community.

**Cultural match.** The Mexican American women applied for positions in school districts that were similar to their culture and life experiences. Their seeking out school districts that “were like them” infers that they choice not to seek school districts where they would be pressured to blend their cultural identity in-order to assimilate with dominating social norms that may differ from their cultural influences. Some purposely sought out school districts that matched their upbringing, where they had experienced educational injustices and racism. Estrella explicitly stated the she purposely sought out a school district where she could feel culturally congruent. “I wanted to be in a place where the people were like me.”

Rita shared her perception of the previous superintendent:

*Hay mucho mexicano...poor and ignorant...he was here for many years and they were in power for 20 years...y como era gringo, el no más se juntaba con la gente gringos y con los ricos” [he was anglo and he only associated with the rich anglos]....*

Other participants referred to the appeal of working with school districts that were culturally congruent with their life history, describing their actions while actively seeking superintendent positions in school districts that had a “majority Hispanic population” and school districts that were in “trouble.” Estrella said, “I wanted a district that had the majority of Hispanic children, so I found one troubled district and I prepared myself.” Rachel said, “I applied in the Valley,...and pretty much looked for school districts in the South...I basically applied south of Austin, in the general area where I was coming from.”

**Compatibility.** The results of this study support the “unwritten rules” of school board members fostering the “subconscious preferences for affiliations with those most like ourselves” in their selection of superintendents (Tallerico, 2000, p. 108). The organizational make-up of the school boards that hired the Mexican American female superintendents were primarily comprised of Hispanic men and women, representative of the community demographics. The reasons these women were chosen to lead these particular school districts was not only because they fit in with the community, but also because: (a) their interpersonal chemistry with the school board members was valued, and (b) they had the personal strengths that matched the school district’s needs.

Irma described how the demographics of the school district that she leads, which had historically practiced segregation, have undergone a shift within the last 20 years. The school district's student population used to consist of a White majority at approximately 60% while the Hispanic population used to be approximately 38%. She said "over the years, we are the flip flop of that...so the majority is now Hispanic low SES[social economic status]." She discussed how this community was "very different from where I grew up, where everyone was Hispanic, 98%, and you have some middle class." Still, she is able to empathize with the overall needs of the school district she leads and had confronted the issues of past injustices. When describing the history of segregation in the community, she said:

I did not grow up with those challenges, but our community here does have those influences. What has allowed me to relate to the community, is being bilingual and understanding the culture. Not only for being Hispanic, but also having experience in middle class values, but understanding the poverty side of it.

Because you have been around it and you have lived it...but, you still understand the middle class culture and you're are able to speak the language.

Irma's predecessor recognized the changing needs of the community and was aware that the district would benefit from a leader who could connect with the changing ethnicity of the school district. Irma disclosed her predecessor's sentiments:

My superintendent told me 'you know there are some challenging things that I deal with. When you come into this role you will be able to impact and make a much bigger difference in areas that I was unable to' and she was unable to because she was a White female. She said, 'you know the folks that come to me

for assistance, I will not have the same credibility that you will have in understanding the culture, being part of the culture and understanding the culture, and being able to speak the language.’ I will say that that has helped, very true.

Catherine has remained in the same general vicinity throughout her 30 plus years in education. She did not leave home when she attended college, and after she graduated from college she began her teaching career in a school district that was near her hometown. Her husband was also from the same area and when they married they remained in the same area they had both grown up. She shared that the White male superintendent before her was not successful because:

He just didn't have the right chemistry with the school board that we have...it just wasn't working for him...the chemistry that was taking place was not allowing him to be successful...but I obviously had the um, public relations skills...anyway, it has just been fantastic, I have done well...he was not able to develop and have a great relationship with the school board. He wasn't from here. I didn't grow up in [town], but I ended up finishing my high school years here...so, I knew a lot of the parents and the community...I guess I was their [school board] little security blanket.

### **District Appeal**

The data supports Newton's (2006) report of the "unwritten hierarchy of school districts" which suggests that the desirability of certain school districts is influenced by district wealth, geographic location, academic achievement status, district size, and student population. The participants of this study sought out school districts that perhaps

other candidates had viewed as undesirable. Yet, in spite of this, they purposely sought out these districts because of their passion for improving education for students.

**Challenge.** For some of the participants the challenge of working with school districts that were experiencing turmoil and not meeting state accountability standards appealed to them.

Isabell said when she was seeking out her second superintendency, “I needed to be challenged. I wanted to learn more.. I had been there. I had done that, blue ribbon school, now it is time to move on.” She accepted her second superintendent position located on the Texas/Mexico border with a majority Hispanic population at 99% and 80% economically disadvantaged.

Rachel was selected for the superintendent position with a school district that had a reputation of receiving unfavorable media attention because of its school board politics. What was probably an undesirable school district for some appealed to Rachel as a “challenge and she was not swayed from accepting the position.

I don’t know if you know the history [school board]. It is a very volatile district and in fact when I applied, people are like are you crazy! ... I had so many warnings friends from TEA [Texas Education Agency]. Friends from across the state were like, are you crazy, *estas loca!* I am just like, yeah, yeah, I am up to the challenge. I like challenges.

**Change agent.** Each participant shared the need of being change agents in order to improve the educational opportunities for the students and families they were serving. These women were aware that change would be difficult for some members of the community, but understood the need to make drastic changes for the sake of improving

instruction. Gabriella, “This audit says for the last 12 years nothing good has happened”. She shared that the board members had not been aware of that the district was in so much “trouble” because “the last two male administrators, would tell them everything is fine, we are making gains here and there, but everything is fine”. These women found it essential to bring the challenges of the district to the surface so that they could “fix” the organizational systems that were “broken”. Rita encountered resistance to change from staff and school board members while implementing procedures and departmental systems in a school district that “violated State and Federal” regulations. She said:

The board...really wanted a change agent to come in and make it happen. But, I kind of get mixed messages from the board...They want us to change things and then they say well we don't have to change so many things...Yeah, , you do have to make the changes...and if people don't do their job it is our job to call it to their attention...You have a problem you have to fix it... We started holding people accountable and they did not like being held accountable.

**Make a difference.** Estrella shared her goals for the types of school district she wanted to lead. For her first superintendency she shared how she purposely sought out school districts with a “majority Hispanic population” and a “troubled” school district. Now in her second superintendency, her desire was to continue to work with the same type of school districts. Her pursuit led her to school districts away from where she had grown up and south of where she had experienced discrimination while working as a district administrator.

I was really hungry for a district, so I saw a couple of districts that I was really excited about. I saw one and applied for it and they offered me the job...but, I

thought, there's nothing, there's no housing there...I declined it. Then I saw this district [current district]...they were gracious enough to offer me the job and here I am. Both these school districts were located south and both the school districts had a majority of Hispanic students.

Estrella was able to choose a school district that appealed to her and where she felt she could “make a difference.”

**Give back to my community.**” Some of the participants also spoke of wanting to return to their home town so that they could give back to their community. Rachel said, “I came back to the community where I grew up in because I really wanted to make a difference.” Isabel said, “I went back to teach in my home town after I graduated from college...because I really wanted to make a difference.”

### **Gender and Ethnicity Biases**

The underlying concept of this study was grounded in feminist theory, and viewed through the lens of Chicana feminist thought. Chicana feminist theory recognizes that Mexican American women have struggled with inequalities which differed from White women’s struggles. The Chicana feminist movement included confronting both sexism and racism. The framework of Chicana feminism was based on the critical view presented by Gallardo (1996) which considers the inequalities of race, gender, sexuality, and class that affect women of Mexican descent in the United States.

Rita was the only the participant who reported encountering issues related to both race and gender during her superintendency. It is important to note, that she was the only superintendent who was selected by a school board that was comprised of a majority of White school board members.

The ones that hired me were gringos, which I thought was so spectacular but no, *nunca te crees de la gente* ...in hindsight they thought they could do whatever they wanted to do with me. They wanted a puppet...think about it at the time, I am 58 now, I was 55 and retired. They thought I was lower middle class. We are not rich but we are not lower middle class...they wanted to control me.

### **Gender Stereotyping**

“Women are supposed to be more concerned with taking care of the home, of the children, and take the tender roles” (Hofstede, 2010, p. 138). Tallerico and Blount (2004) assert that the role of the superintendent has traditionally “been defined and institutionalized as men’s work” (p.642). Gender based social roles exist in all societies and the participants of the study substantiated that gender stereotyping indirectly exists in the organizational systems of school districts. They contended that gender biases are possible obstacles for other Hispanic women who are pursuing the superintendency. Isabel shared her views on the impact of having Latina superintendent role models. She also acknowledged that her standing as an educational leader sets a precedent for other aspiring Mexican American female superintendents. She expressed her beliefs about how some Latina superintendents have been scrutinized:

There are no mentors out there and the visibility of Latina superintendents. When there has been it has come crashing down... you know [names example] in a huge district and you think here is a great opportunity, this is a chance for someone to really shine...and she comes crashing down...in very prominent headlines and things go wrong...and then within a year they are ousted. So then, that doesn’t help because then they start stereotyping and even those districts to accept another

Latina to come in, will not. They would not do that to men, 'cause it could be a White man who did the same thing...so they will not replace her with another Latina... You gotta really put yourself out there and have a great reputation.

Isabel has been successful in gaining access to the historically male dominated profession and is in her 3<sup>rd</sup> superintendency. She understands that she is unique in her field:

You can infiltrate and really get to know the good ole boy system and earn their respect...because they are good ole boys, and they are going to think like their own, and they are not as willing to give Latinas an opportunity, because, there are not that many to say that have a good track record...it is very much male dominated still...I think, I am the exception.

Rita shared her views on gender based traits and her perceptions of gender stereotyping and acknowledged that it creates barriers for Mexican American women who are seeking the superintendency.

I honestly think that we are not given a chance. You know we have our families, but we juggle better than anybody we know...I think we are viewed as curriculum people. I think that we are viewed with thinking with the heart and not with our heads. Just not given the chance, we have not proven ourselves and part of the reason is because sometimes we cry. People think because you listen it is a sign of weakness.

Rita's story exemplifies the inner conflicts that Latina's experience regarding gender and ethnicity stereotyping, "I did not sleep my way to the top,...that's important for a woman, because everybody thinks that a Latina sleeps her way to the top."

These women defy the traditional social pre-existing perceptions of gender roles and demonstrate the ability assert themselves as an effective leader in a male dominated profession. The Mexican American female superintendents were hired by school boards that had Hispanic representation with both male and female board members.

### **School Board Politics**

Ortiz (1998) concluded that the appointment of Hispanic females to the superintendent position has symbolic and political overtones for the school district. The organizational make-up of the school boards that hired the Mexican American female superintendents from this study were comprised of mostly Hispanic men and women. The gender of the school board members were fairly equally represented (Table 4). For the participants of this study, the ability to be effective in their current position was related to the types of relationships they were able to develop with each school board member.

Table 3  
Region and School District Board Members

<b>Superintendent</b>	<b>Location by Educational Service Center</b>	<b>Percentage Hispanic Population</b>	<b>Gender &amp; Ethnicity of Board Members</b>
Estrella Mendez-Adams	Region 2	92.63%	<u>2<sup>nd</sup> Superintendency</u> 4 Hispanic Females 3 Hispanic Males  2 White Females 1 Hispanic Female
Rita Chavez	Region 1	93.5%	2 White Males 2 Hispanic Males
Catherine Garcia	Region 2	77.9%	2 Hispanic Females 3 Hispanic Males 2 White Males
Isabel Salinas	Region 2	86.4%	<u>3<sup>rd</sup> Superintendency</u> 3 Hispanic Females 3 Hispanic Males 1 African American Female
Irma Gonzales	Region 13	65.95%	2 White Females 2 White Males 3 Hispanic Males
Gabriella Evans	Region 2	93.4%	<u>1<sup>st</sup> - Superintendency</u> 1 Hispanic Female 6 Hispanic Males <u>2<sup>nd</sup> Superintendency</u> 5 Hispanic Males 2 White Males
Rachel Robertson	Region 20	97.1%	1 White Female 3 Hispanic Females 3 Hispanic Males

**Superintendent school board relationships.** The superintendent school board relations varied among the participants. Irma and Catherine have both worked with their school districts for over 20 years and both of these superintendents have been able to sustain a community that works collaboratively to improve educational opportunities for all students. Irma was entering her tenth year as superintendent and Catherine was entering her 11<sup>th</sup> year. It is uncommon for superintendents to serve at the same school district for more than five years. The study by Quinn (2005) reported that superintendents on average serve three years or less. These two superintendents have successfully established long lasting relationships in their communities which they attribute to their success.

Catherine developed strong and strategically effective working relationships with the school board members in her district. Catherine gained support and trust from all the school district's board members that enabled her to make thorough administrative decisions regarding the daily operations of the school district. She attributes chemistry and compromise as some of the dynamics that existed in her development of positive superintendent–school board relations. Part of her success has been sharing a common vision with the school board and remaining flexible about philosophy, vision, and administrative decisions. When she spoke of her success in operating the superintendency, she said:

There is some school district politics involved...well, I am not dumb either. So, I knew that I had to find out who the sacred cows were first. I had to make sure, who are the sacred cows here and who do I not touch. ...I learned pretty quickly that it was all up to me and I took off and did what I needed to do. I was smart

enough to know, if there was someone here that I was not content with and didn't feel that I could work with, but that the board absolutely adored. I would learn to work with that person...I may have my certain philosophy, but, I am also smart enough to realize, that if I have a different school board come in, my philosophy may change. ...I have to mirror the philosophy of the entire school board...I have done a phenomenal job of bringing people together. I am very proud of my board.

**Trust.** Some of the women reported receiving absolute support for administrative decisions from the school board members. These women had developed trust from all school board members in their capabilities of overseeing the everyday operations of the school district. The women were strategic and purposeful in their efforts to develop and maintain effective superintendent and school board relations. Gabriella shared that it was not always easy to confront the pre-existing issues that had caused low student performance, but it was important to bring these issues to the surface, so that the school board members would grasp the severity problems the school district was facing.

I basically told them, if you want me to change it and if you want improvement and you want to get out of the hole that we are in. Then you have to follow my lead and let me do what I need to do. You need to trust me...I told them when I come in I am going to give you the all facts, whether they are good, bad, or ugly. You are always going to know what is going on. They were in a lot of trouble, with audits that they had never seen before. Now they have the correct information and they realized how much trouble they were in....we have been there for a long time...they trust me now and I am trying to do what is best for the kids.

Isabel spoke of her first superintendency experience as positive and establishing a trusting relationship with her board members who allowed her to run the everyday operations of the school district which resulted in receiving a “blue ribbon” status from the state.

They trusted me and we shared the same vision. They allowed me to do what I needed to do. I think that’s why we were able to move so quickly, it was like the perfect combination. They had the desire and wanted to move forward. Let’s bring the right person, let’s move together. They were very supportive. We worked together through thick and thin. We had to let go of people who were not good for kids, so they supported those decisions.

**Internal conflict.** In contrast, some of the other superintendents struggled in their efforts to maintain effective superintendent-board relations. These struggles are not related to their ability to manage the organizational system, but their ability to get the school board members to focus on “student needs.” Kowalski, (2006) reported that school board policy decisions have internal and external functions. The internal function ensures administrative control for the superintendent regarding fiscal decisions about budgets and district outputs. Externally, the school board decisions should act in the community’s best interest. Kowalski stated “When board members elect to assume administrative duties, conflict between the superintendent and board members becomes highly probable” (p. 125). The conflicts with board members that were portrayed by some of the participants mirrors Kowalski’s (2006) report.

Gabriella reported that she did not do well with the “school board politics” at her first superintendency, which resulted in her losing interest in seeking another superintendency because she was “burned out.”

You know, I just can't deal with the politics, with board politics. They drove me crazy. I was there for four years. It is already difficult enough, you know, to do the job. You have to deal with having interference from people who are not educators...they do not understand a lot of things, so, when they place obstacles in your path and you know the job you have to do and you have to go around those. Well that's just time and energy...I could not deal with that.

Rachel had accepted the superintendent position at a school district that had the reputation of undergoing internal turmoil among the district's school board members.

Things just started unraveling with the board...we worked very hard to establish our relationships and getting them to focus on education...in just a matter of a week, just like that. It just self-destructed. I was like 'oh my gosh' and it was so crazy. People were telling me this happens every May.

These women expressed that some of the interests of particular board members conflicted with their professional judgment regarding what was best for children and their ethical principles. Rachel said,

I have my integrity, the day I lose my integrity I might as well get out of here...I follow the law. I follow the rules. I do not do anything immoral or illegal...I will not do things that I am not supposed to do...The day they ask me to do that, we need to part ways. It is amazing how they target people...I ended up losing most of my staff that I brought in, because they were being targeted, by the

board... When you want to start picking and choosing who gets a contract and who doesn't that is a problem. It is not about job performance. It is about someone not liking them... people in this district were never held accountable and that was a big problem... how, do you like them apples!

**Motives.** Rita addressed her suspicion of alternative motives from the school district's board members who had actively sought her out for the position. She alleged that the intent of specific board members was to hire a superintendent they could control. She professed that ethnicity and gender were the unspoken but determining factors for her selection. Her response to my probing of whether she believed that gender or race impacted the school board's decision to select her for the superintendency, was "Absolutely, they wanted a puppet and they saw a deer blinded. *Ponte a pensar* [think about it]. You know a woman, over the hill." She declared that some of the directives that she was given were not in the best interest of the children or the community. Rita expressed her discontent with the notion of being brought in as a "puppet" by saying,

They [2 school board members] had done their research and they found me, so um, it just happened, probably illegally, if you will, because they really had no business doing that *mi entiendes* [you understand]. I was supposed to have interviewed and applied, rightfully gotten it, well not... [that] isn't what happened. I didn't rightfully get it. I got it... they wanted to meet me. They had never met me before. They had read my dissertation. They had done all kinds of research on me. How they got my name, I will never know. I became the superintendent.

Rita conceded that she had been given directives by some of the board members that disagreed with her ethical beliefs. She said the motive behind the school board

members for removing specific staff members was “because they did not vote for them. I don’t care what anybody says they buy the votes, they buy the votes, it’s nothing about children, it’s about power.” However, Rita no longer saw herself as a “puppet.” She empowered herself by contesting directives that she considered were not in the best interest of the school district. She said, “Deep down in my heart, I knew what they were doing, but, I was too eager. Once I knew better, I put a stop to it.” The board members who had caused her contention were replaced by new board members. She said, “I speak in the past because things have dramatically changed. She has successfully increased the school district’s accountability rating to exemplary.

**Power: “control.”** For the women that reported having conflicts with board members, their ability to navigate the superintendency effectively was related to power struggles between the women and certain board members. The women shared their inner conflicts about being “controlled” by board members and being treated like a “puppet.

Gabriella revealed how she struggle in her role as the superintendent with a majority Hispanic male school board.

We had made some significant gains and did a lot, but man it was difficult, very difficult. The board was basically split. I only had two that supported me 100% and the others didn’t. I was there four years, after the third they basically told me they wanted me to resign, but I didn’t because I only need one more year to retire. So how was I going to take another job for only one year. I am not that type of person. I follow through with my commitment.

Gabriella determined not to leave until she was ready. Her retirement brought her a sense of strength and empowerment.

Hell,.. I am retired, I have the attitude, I am here to do a job and if they don't like it they can let me know and it will take me 30 seconds to write my letter of resignation. I think that is very, very powerful.

Rita spoke of the changes that have occurred in her current school district and how she realized she needed to empower herself and not allow herself to be controlled and treated like a “puppet” any longer. These changes occurred when new board members were elected.

I was a puppet for a year and a half... It's nothing about children it is not about children it's about power. They were in power for 20 plus years...new board members were elected and those that had been in power were removed... the board president and his wife had been empowered, but she quit the board and left town...now comes a new board president...the other members are now in power...I mean it is incredible...right now things are OK.

Each of the Mexican American female superintendents demonstrated the necessary skills to operate the complex organizational systems that individual school districts have and navigate the school board politics that occur. Some of the participants admitted that developing effective superintendent – school board relationships with all school board members had been challenging, and they were not willing to compromise their integrity by administrative decisions that they perceived as unethical.

### **Personal Attributes**

Each of the Mexican American female superintendents shared common attributes, self-efficacy and confidence, risk-taking traits, and determination and self-perseverance. These attributes were revealed throughout their conversations when describing their life

histories, their experiences in seeking and obtaining the superintendency, their motivation for the superintendency, and their ability to navigate the superintendency.

**Self-efficacy and confidence.** Each participant expressed that early in their administrative career they had set personal goals for pursuing the superintendency. They each exhibited an inherent sense of self- efficacy and expressed confidence in their skills and their ability to make sound decisions in their superintendent role. Bandura (1994) defined self – efficacy as “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations” (p. 75).

Estrella expressed her sense of self-efficacy when she confronted racism with these words “I know who I am...that’s [racial comments] irrelevant to me, I know what I am.” She also realized that she needed to take the initial step in pursuing the superintendency and did not wait for someone to tell her she was ready. She said, “I thought I don’t need someone else to determine when I am ready...so those are the thoughts that entered my head.” She obtained her first superintendency after one interview and was successful in improving student performance.

Gabriella’s sense of self efficacy was expressed throughout our interview. She shared her experience as a young girl and how her parents served as role models in setting goals to pursue a college education.

I come from a family of nine children. My mom is a workaholic. My dad is a hard worker, but, I think my mom is worse. They did receive their college education...so they served as real good role models for us...the importance of getting ahead and having aspirations, I think was instilled at us at a very early age

Gabriella from an early age displayed confidence in her ability to achieve success, even when faced with opposition. The following statements capture the essence of her confidence in self and her ability to persevere.

I think a very long time ago when I was in high school I said I was going to get a doctorate degree. I remember the kids would laugh at me when I would tell them that...the percentage of kids that graduated and went to college was minimal...they would laugh at me and I said I am going to show them.

Gabriella eventually earned a doctorate degree and all of her eight siblings have college degrees. As an adult Gabriella has held on to her sense of self and displays confidence in her abilities to successfully operate within the superintendent role. When she spoke of her interview for her second superintendency, she said, “I told the board members during my interview, I know what needs to be done and I need you to let me do what needs to be done... I will get you to where we need to go, that’s how I am.”

Both Estrella and Gabriella expressed confidence in their leadership capabilities in meeting the high demands of supervising the complex organization of a school district. They have both been successful in making significant improvements to the school districts that they lead. The five other superintendents in this study also displayed their sense of efficacy throughout my observations and during the interviews. Each female in this study expressed confidence in her ability to effectively lead her school district with the commitment to improve education for all children.

**Risk taking traits.** The superintendent’s role is a complex and multi-faceted position. Kowalski (2006) declared that today’s superintendents “must wear several different hats if they are to be effective regardless of the type and size of school district”

(p. 50). Considering the complexities of the superintendency and the role-related demands of the superintendent position, it often takes the ability of being fearless and the willingness to take risks to be effective. The women in the study displayed the willingness to take risks when seeking and operating the superintendency. The willingness to take risks was displayed in two forms. One was a “just do it” attitude when the opportunity for the superintendency presented itself and for others taking the risk meant relocating and leaving spouses and family behind. This confirmed the study by Couch (2007) who reported that Mexican American female superintendents referred to themselves as risk takers and possessed a “can do attitude” (p. 212). Brunner (1999) concluded that in order for women to pursue the superintendency, they must exhibit courage and a willingness to accept risks. The women of this study represented themselves as possessing the courage to do whatever was necessary to ascend into the superintendency and the courage to make systematic changes to improve educational programs for students despite resistance from others.

Estrella spoke of how she decided to pursue the superintendency after being encouraged by a Hispanic male mentor to “spread her wings” and leave West Texas where she had established her administrative career. She sought superintendent positions in the southern part of the state, got her first superintendency several miles away from her home, and moved with her children to a new location.

Gabriella accepted her first superintendent position recognizing that it might be challenging for her, but was willing to take the risk. “I was very apprehensive because you are talking about all Hispanic men [school board]. I knew that some of those males were going to have some issues.” Gabriella did encounter the challenges that she had

anticipated, but remained firm in her commitment to improve programs for all students. She remained fearless as she continued to advocate for the necessary changes that needed to occur in order to make improvements in the school district. She was successful in her efforts for increasing student performance, but at the end of this experience she was “burned out.”

Rachel’s primary goal was to provide educational opportunities for all children. She accepted a high profile position with a school district that was known for unfavorable media attention. She recognized that her appointment meant taking a risk but she looked forward to the “challenge.” She had to leave her home town, her family, and the school district where she had worked for over 30 years. These words express her willingness to risk getting out of her comfort zone:

So leaving [home] was a big, I mean was a big leap of faith. It really was a huge leap of faith...I had to make a choice, you can spend the rest of your life wondering whether you were able to be a superintendent or not or just go out there and do it!

Catherine had grown up, gone to college, and remained in the general vicinity of “home” throughout her professional career. She chose to stay in an area that she was “comfortable” and familiar with. Even though she stated that when the superintendent position became open she was cautious in her decision for applying and accepting the superintendency. Her prudence about leaping into the superintendent role at that time was based on what she had witnessed her predecessor experience as superintendent. One could infer that this reluctance may not involve the willingness to take risks, however, she eventually chose to take the risk by “jumping in” and “just doing it.”

I was assistant superintendent here...I had a fantastic job...I did not want to be a superintendent... the school board said 'well we got a superintendent vacancy'... I said I have no interest in doing this job. They [school board] said "no we want you to do this job"...I had a school board that absolutely adored me and said and "go ahead and try it and if you decide you don't want to do it, maybe after a short time we will put you back as assistant superintendent"... I was not too excited about it [the superintendent position], but I jumped in and I did it and I do not regret it.

Catherine has remained the superintendent of schools at her school district for 11 years. She demonstrated being confident in her skills and willing to take risks when necessary. "It has been fantastic, I have done well."

All the Mexican American women in this study illustrated their fearless nature. Some of these personality traits were evident in their willingness to take risks when applying for the superintendency while others displayed their courage by confronting resistance to systematic change. This characteristic trait ran deep in all of the women.

**Determination and self-perseverance.** Another personality trait that was evident in all the women was determination in obtaining their pre-set goals and their self – perseverance when they faced challenges in their quest for achieving their goals. Gabriella disclosed that when she began to search for her first superintendency she did not have a mentor to support her in her superintendent search. She drew upon perseverance, determination, and support from family while pursuing the superintendency. She had submitted several applications when seeking her first superintendent position.

Oh my God, I submitted about 30 [applications], over a 5 year period, maybe more, but at the very least 30...no interviews...I could not understand why I was not being called ...I worked to make myself very marketable...I always knew that I wanted to get it [superintendency] it was the ultimate goal.

Gabriella's determination to reach her goal paid off and she eventually obtained her first superintendency. This success enabled her to increase her social capital, to include professional networking and trusting community relationships which assisted her in obtaining her second superintendency much quicker.

Estrella's stories of overcoming educational injustices as an immigrant student from Mexico and withstanding the overt racial discrimination and gender biases she experienced while in West Texas demonstrate her determination to obtain her goal for the superintendency and her commitment to serving Hispanic children and families.

### **Summary**

The literature review revealed that there is limited research on female superintendents of color and significantly less on Mexican American female superintendents. This qualitative inquiry adds seven voices of Mexican American female superintendents from the state of Texas to the limited literature on this topic. The detailed descriptions of the participants revealed specific phases in the preparation, search and obtainment of the superintendency . Each participant was strategic in their efforts for obtaining the necessary credentials which allowed them to successfully obtain the superintendent position. The phases for obtaining the superintendency where : (a) superintendency as the goal, (b) motivation for seeking the superintendency, (c) interviewing for the superintendency, and (d) obtaining the superintendency. Their stories

uncovered central themes associate with personal experiences of racism, cultural congruency, gender stereotyping. These experiences impacted the appeal of certain types of school districts, and as a result created a mixture of experiences related to school board politics. The noticeable pattern of school types and locations is suggestive as to district appeal for Mexican American female superintendents. The final analysis of data also uncovered similar personal attributes of self-efficacy and confidence, risk taking traits, and determination and perseverance.

The strategies and skills that the participants depicted in this study will provide aspiring Mexican American female superintendents a foundation for preparing themselves for their search for the superintendent position. The experiences of these Mexican American female superintendents are extraordinary stories of commitment and dedication to improving the educational opportunities for Hispanic children. They are up for the “challenge” of working with “troubled” and “broken” school districts that have not been able to meet the educational needs of all children. These are unique women in their field who strive to improve educational opportunities for Hispanic students and students from low social economic status. They are also committed to serving all students and have the internal desire to “make a difference” in our educational system.

## **VI. DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This in-depth phenomenological study explored the experiences of seven Mexican American female superintendents in Texas. The study addressed the following questions: What have been the experiences of Mexican American women while seeking and operating within the superintendency? What factors motivate Mexican American women to seek the superintendent position? And, what strategies and supports are available to Mexican American females as they seek and retain a superintendent's position?

Seven narratives of each participant were presented in Chapter IV. In order to provide the reader with a thorough understanding of the life histories and experiences of these Mexican American women, I felt that it was imperative to include each one. Their stories revealed similar backgrounds and life experiences. The patterns and themes that emerged from analysis of the data were reported in Chapter V. This final chapter contains a discussion of themes that emerged from the data, implications and recommendations, and limitations of the study.

### **Discussion of Themes**

The cultural influences of the participants were explored during the analysis of data to see how personal identities had been shaped by a variety of influences. Flores (1997) reported that the integration of different cultural dimensions creates conflicts for Latinas. The women often spoke of their how their cultural backgrounds influenced their desire to seek school districts that were culturally congruent with their life experiences, and for some their personal encounters with racism and educational inequality were the motivational factors for seeking the superintendency.

The participants of the study shared common personal traits of self-efficacy and confidence, determination and perseverance, commitment and dedication. The women demonstrated competence in leading what some may consider “challenging” school districts. Their success is attributed to their personal drive, motivation and commitment for improving educational opportunities for all children, regardless of social economic status and ethnicity

### **School Districts**

The size and types of school districts that Mexican American female superintendents lead has not changed from earlier studies (Ortiz, 1999). Ortiz concluded that Mexican American women are appointed to the superintendency in school districts that are experiencing turmoil and located “where no one else is likely to want to go” (p.99). In contrast to the earlier studies these women purposely sought out these types of school districts and were committed to fixing what one superintendent referred to as “broken” and “shattered” school systems. In 15 years, little has changed. All seven Mexican American superintendents interviewed for this study work in predominantly Hispanic school districts located along the Texas-Mexico border or close to it in districts that are considered troubled school systems. These systems were malfunctioning as evidenced by the resistance to change and deficit thinking that the participants constantly encountered from school board members and staff. Additionally, these districts have fewer resources which create challenges when implementing school improvement models. The participants of this study were committed to improving the overall operations of the school district.

Brunner and Bjork (2001) assert that the job of the superintendent has become crucial in determining the fate of a school district. Kowalski (2006) reported that present day superintendents must wear “several different hats” in the superintendent role in order to be effective. He argued that superintendents in smaller districts face additional challenges in their role because the smaller districts “rarely have the support staff” that is found in larger districts (p. 50). The participants of the study spoke of the challenges of recruiting and retaining well qualified staff for their school districts, because the surrounding larger districts were able to offer more pay. They also spoke of having to wear “different hats” in their role as superintendents in smaller school districts. The superintendents in this study demonstrated their capabilities of improving schools that had failed to meet federal and state accountability measures and effectively promoted a vision towards achieving success of all students.

### **Cultural Match**

The participants of this study shared their personal desire to remain in school districts where they felt more comfortable due to cultural congruency. Considering there are no Mexican American female superintendents located in the other areas of the state, one can infer that these school districts have yet to consider Mexican American women as a match for their school districts. This parallels Tallerico’s (2000) conclusions pertaining to the “unwritten rules” of the selection of superintendents (p. 137). Her research revealed that search consultants, who tend to be White men, place value on the “interpersonal chemistry” between school board members and potential candidates as a desirable factor for the selection of superintendents. This concept cultivates the “subconscious preferences for affiliations with those most like ourselves” (p. 108). These

preferences can cause barriers for aspiring Mexican American female superintendents, since head hunters tend to be White males and those with the authority to hire superintendents (school boards) tend to also be White or Hispanic men (Blount, 1999; Tallerico, 2000).

The perception of best fit for the community needs to be challenged in order to change the current status quo. The results of this study will assist educational leadership programs in preparing Mexican American women for the superintendent search by training them to make themselves more marketable in the “individualist’ culture within conventional school organizations. Hofsted (2010) defined aspects of individualist societies where “ties between the individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself” (p. 92).

The experiences of these seven extraordinary women will also benefit search consultants and school boards by providing them with an understanding of cultural congruency and an awareness of collectivist ideals that Mexican American women share. Customarily, the cultural expectations of Mexican American women are that she acts “according to the interest of the group” and not her personal interest ( Hofsted, 2010, p. 119) This includes displaying humility which may not coincide with individualist standards. My goal is to be able to use this study to provide training aimed at changing pre-existing biases related to gender and ethnicity to school board members who lack the understanding of cultural influences on leadership styles and guide them in accepting diverse leadership traits. This study validates that the personal traits of Mexican American female superintendents are attributes that should be viewed an asset for any superintendent position. Nonetheless, aspiring Mexican American female superintendent

should be cognizant that their own assessment of a good fit with members of the school board and the community is imperative in their ability to successfully navigate the superintendency.

### **Seeking and Obtaining the Superintendency**

When I began the study, my assumptions were that these women would divulge having faced the likely barriers connected to gender and/or race biases that had been reported in earlier studies (Galloway, 2006; Gonzalez, 2007; Quilantan, 2002). I was inspired to learn that some of the women claimed not to have encountered these barriers as they pursued the superintendency. However, as they recounted their life histories, personal experiences associated with ethnicity and/or gender biases were uncovered. These personal experiences occurred during their formative years and/or during their ascension to the superintendency as educational administrators at the campus and district level. Furthermore, each participant conceded that barriers associated with gender and/or ethnicity remains an issue for Mexican American women.

Each of the women had set their goal of pursuing the superintendency early in their administrative career. The participants in the study discussed common barriers as they moved up the career ladder within the educational organization, they relied on extensive support mechanisms, which included support from family members and mentors, abundant social capital, as well as their own drive and determination. Overall, their management of organizational mobility was successfully navigated as they acquired the necessary qualifications and skills needed for the superintendency. After successfully achieving their ultimate career goal, they each expressed that they were satisfied with their role a superintendent.

**Self -efficacy and confidence.** The women exhibited an inherent sense of self-efficacy and confidence in their skills and their ability to successfully navigate the superintendent role. Bandura (1994) defined self–efficacy as “the belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations” (p. 75). All of the participants had strong curriculum experience and they expressed their commitment to improve education for all children. However, making systematic changes to pre-existing systems that were broken proved to be challenging when they encountered road blocks related to power and control from school board members, as well as resistance from staff members who were not accustomed to being held accountable for failing to meet the needs of students. These road blocks did not discourage the women from implementing organizational change that would meet all of the educational mandates prescribed by the State’s educational governing boards. The women were the “primary catalyst for change” that present day superintendents need to be effective within the complexity of the superintendent role (Kowalski, 1999, p. 50).

**Gender stereotyping.** Tallerico and Blount (2004) assert that the role of the superintendent has traditionally “been defined and institutionalized as men’s work” (p.642). “Schools are gender bound institutions” (Brunner, 1999, p. xi), thus it is important to understand the different experiences of female superintendents. Female superintendents have different experiences than males and their reality differs from male superintendents (Brunner, 1999; Grogan, 1996). Given the lack of understanding regarding the experiences of Mexican American female superintendents, it is important to document their experiences which differ significantly from those of White women, White men, and Hispanic men. The participants represented in this study had developed a sense

of self and they are comfortable with the fact that they are women in a male dominated profession. Each of the participants viewed their gender as an asset to the profession, and they were comfortable with the fact that they are the chief executive officer of a school district.

**Cultural gender expectations.** Through some of their conversations the women in this study exposed experiences with gender stereotyping related their culture. Anzaldua (2006) claimed that Mexican American women are considered selfish when they do not surrender to traditional role expectations. She asserted that in the Mexican American culture, “if you do not behave like everyone else, *la gente*, will say, *que te crees grande*,” [the people will say you think you’re better than others] (p. 17). This familiar aphorism espoused by Anzaldua’s words resonated with my personal cultural experiences. My engagement with this recognizable *diche* [saying] was recently reinforced by my mother when I spoke to her about the results of this research project. She said to me “well don’t let it get to your head.” I chuckled as she said this because it validated the realization that traditional role expectations continue to be instilled in the Mexican American culture. In our culture, as young girls we are taught to remain humble, because you do not want to appear “*que te crees grande*.” In addition Mexican American girls are raised to keep quiet. “*En bocca cerrada no entran moscas*, flies don’t enter a closed mouth, or *mucha chitas bien criadas*, well-bred girls don’t talk or answer back, and *es una falta de respect*, to talk back to one’s mother or father is disrespectful” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 54).

The increase of Hispanic students in Texas public schools will affect the cultural and societal dimensions of schools. As this population continues to grow, Hispanic

teachers, administrators, and superintendents will be viewed as role models for these students. These strong and assertive Mexican American female superintendents are positive role models for young Mexican American girls and boys. Their own personal cultural experiences provide them with a gateway to reach Mexican American students to embrace their cultural influences and guide them to be successful in our public school system.

**Cultural congruency.** Mexican American girls' identity is influenced by a variety of cultural influences, including parents, peers, mentors or role models, and their educational experiences. The cultural backgrounds of these participants influenced their decisions to seek the superintendency with school districts that matched their cultural experiences.

The Mexican American woman in this study exemplified the modern Latina who has defied the stereo-typical submissive role and has become, instead, a strong, confident, and assertive woman. The traditional Mexican American culture had deemed these traits in women as unfavorable. Men had the power and women were expected to display submissiveness and to accept the value system created by men (Anazaldua, 1987). Both Mexican American women and Mexican American males have evolved from the traditional gender role expectations that had been governed for many years by tradition and culture. However, some Mexican American girls customarily those from lower social economic status are expected to adhere to the traditional sex-role expectations (Quilantan, 2002). The participants of this study exhibited personal traits of assertiveness and confidence which are advantageous characteristics in educational leadership.

**Cultural influences.** The participants of this study all spoke of the impact that their family members had on their lives. Some of them spoke of the low expectations that were set by their primary educators, thus their experiences of receiving a less than adequate educational foundation led to their desire to make a difference in students' educational experiences. Tribal (2001) claimed that in the Mexican culture a girl's "sense of self is based on the affiliation with the group and responsibility to the other members of the group, rather than on personal achievement for her ends" (p. 12). This statement underscores the cultural influences which shaped the participants' identities. They often spoke of their responsibility to other members of their groups, which included family, community and school district personnel. They talked about wanting to "give back to their community" and doing what is "best for kids" through collaboration with "team" members. The participants each displayed a strong sense of self efficacy and set goals for college and career aspirations in their early years. Each of them talked about the expectations their families imparted regarding education. For some, the expectation was to at least graduate from high school and for others the expectation was to obtain college degrees.

Hispanic students account for the highest number of high school dropouts in the state of Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2008). The value of an education needs to be instilled in our future generation, *el educación nay den de lo va a guitar* [no one can take your education away], (Rita's grandfather). Even though the participants of this study are providing the much needed role-modeling in their own school districts, the under-representation of Mexican American female superintendents across the State places limits on role models for other groups of students.

**Superintendents as organizational change agent.** Burke (2002) reported that when an organization attempts to enact changes in an effort to shift individual attitudes and beliefs the values of the organization will subsequently be altered. The participants of the study each spoke of wanting to “make a difference” in schools because of their own backgrounds and identified themselves as “change agents.” They each shared a vision of building a school culture that valued learning where all staff believed that all students could be successful. The participants communicated their expectations of doing “what is best for all children.” Kowalski (2006) stated that school improvement concepts encourage superintendents to be collaborative leaders who pursue collective visions. He identifies one important role of the superintendent as “superintendent as communicator” (p. 54). He argues that the school culture is influenced by communicative behaviors and that “communicative behavior is instrumental to building, maintaining, and changing culture” (p. 49). The participants in this study demonstrated the role as communicator and each woman led the process for restructuring the malfunctioning school systems by working collaboratively with all members of the school community. They were straightforward when communicating diagnostic information to school board members regarding the necessity of restructuring the broken systems that had resulted in state and federal actions. They each were confident in their ability to move the school district forward and their goal was to build collective visions for school improvement.

### **Strategies and Support**

The women in this study utilized specific strategies and drew upon similar support systems in their preparation, search, and their operation of the superintendency. These included reliance on mentors and/or sponsors, social capital, and support from their

families throughout their administrative careers. The support systems that were in place for the superintendents in the study were crucial to their success in navigating both the path to the superintendency, and performing in the role once it was attained. The support mechanisms that sustained them in the role of superintendent were the same support systems they had relied on during their preparation and search. The participants also referred to an additional support system once they had obtained the superintendency, which was patronage from current school board members. Receiving support from their school board members was vital in their ability to retain the superintendency. The participants spoke of how colleagues and community members, provided an additional form of support once they were in the superintendent role. However, each participant commented that once they obtained the superintendent position there was a lack of peer mentoring available to them from Mexican American female superintendents. The women realized the importance of support while navigating the superintendent role and relied on the support from colleagues, school board members, community members, and family.

**Getting the job.** I reported in the previous chapter that four of the women obtained their first position after only having one interview for the position. Four of the participants disclosed that they were not actively seeking the superintendency, but when the opportunity for the position presented itself, they took advantage of the opportunity. The women had mentors and/or sponsors who identified their potential for becoming school districts leaders. The mentors actively took part in connecting the women to hiring consultants and school board members which resulted in the successful obtainment of the position. For two of the superintendents successfully obtaining the superintendency

required a little more initiative, and for one it meant leaving her comfort zone in her home town and taking that “leap of faith”. Each participant demonstrated determination and persistence in reaching their ultimate career goal of the superintendency and displayed their confidence in their skills for leading a school district.

**Social capital.** The superintendency can be a lonely and isolated position (Couch, 2007). The demands of the job can be difficult and balancing work and home has always been a challenge for all working mothers. Learning to cope with these challenges and having support systems in place are imperative for women who aspire to the superintendency, and who want to perform optimally in the role. The participants in the study had cultivated social capital and extensive professional support systems throughout their administrative career. For the purpose of this study, social capital was defined as developing trust and cooperation “through structures of personal relationships and strong networks” (Ortiz, 2001, p. 62). According to Putman (2000) “the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value” (p. 19) and that connections among individuals and social networks creates reciprocal trustworthiness. The networks that these women drew upon were family, district school board members, community members, professional mentors and sponsors. Moreover, the results of this study underlined that it is imperative for Mexican American female superintendents to find the right fit with a school board when accepting the superintendent position. The participants in this student repeatedly stated that the quality of the position depended on whether they had the right chemistry and were a good cultural match with the school board and the community.

All participants in the study expressed their commitment and dedication to improving educational opportunities and instruction for all students. They have each developed social capital and have established themselves as effective leaders of the community. A Mexican American female superintendent may be more able to gain parental and community commitment to improving education from a community consisting of higher percentages of Hispanics by embedding themselves in the community and utilizing their social capital. In addition, they are maybe more apt to gain confidence in their ability to steer the school district in a positive direction by nurturing relationships with school boards that foster trust and thoughtful of the culture of the school district. This reduces the likelihood that their appointment is seen as temporary with short range objectives; instead, it encourages the view that their appointment is a lasting and trustworthy relationship that calls for commitment and provides stability to the school district.

No matter what career path a women chooses, women report that balancing work, home, and family responsibilities is internally challenging. Learning to cope with these challenges and having support systems in place was imperative for the Mexican American female superintendent's ability to perform optimally in their roles. The findings from this study corroborated the importance of mentorship, sponsorship, networking and social capital in gaining access to the superintendency. The support systems that the superintendents relied on for operating the superintendency included both family and professional support systems to help them cope with cultural incongruence and school board affairs. These strategies are crucial for other Mexican American women who are seeking the superintendency. Developing and adopting these

types of strategies will provide well-qualified Mexican American female administrators access to the superintendency.

**Motivation.** Each superintendent spoke of their commitment and dedication to improving the educational program for students. They expressed that their motivating factor for seeking the superintendency was the desire to “make a difference” and to do “what is best for children.” All of the superintendents had strong backgrounds in curriculum and each one of them described their ability to improve educational programs for all students. A common vision was the desire to making systematic changes to troubled school districts. Their central focus was to do what was best for children. Each superintendent took the necessary steps to improve educational programs in the school districts that they led.

**Risk taking.** Brunner (1999) concluded that in order for women to pursue the superintendency, they must exhibit courage and a willingness to accept risks. The women of this study represented themselves as possessing the courage to do whatever was necessary to ascend into the superintendency and the courage to make systematic changes to improve educational programs for students despite resistance from others. Some of the women in the study displayed the willingness to take risks. This took one of two forms, either just do it when the opportunity is there or “move if you have to.” These attitudes confirmed Couch’s (2007) report that Mexican American female superintendents referred to themselves as risk takers and in possession of a “can do attitude” (p. 212).

Considering the complexities of the superintendency and the role-related demands of the superintendent position, it often requires fearlessness and a willingness to take risks to be effective. All the Mexican American women in this study illustrated their

fearless nature. Some of these personality traits were evident in their willingness to take risks when applying for the superintendency while others displayed their courage by confronting resistance to systematic change. This characteristic trait ran deep in all of the women.

### **Summary**

I am aware that this report intersects with my perspective of the experiences of the participants in the study, hence the renditions of what was learned reflect the interpretations of what I learned from the each participant story after a thorough assessment of the data. Patton (2002) states “people viewing qualitative findings through different paradigmatic lenses will react differently, just as researchers vary in how we think about what we do when we study the world” (p. 543). My intent was to render the accounts and experiences of the participants as fully and as faithfully as possible.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

The literature revealed that few scholars have provided data on Latina women in educational leadership; this is an area that requires continual examination in order for change to occur (Ortiz, 1997, Mendez-Morse, 1997, Gonzales, 2007). This qualitative inquiry adds seven voices of Mexican American female superintendents from the state of Texas to the limited literature on this topic. The strategies and skills that the participants displayed in this study will provide aspiring Mexican American female superintendents a foundation for preparing themselves for their search for the superintendent position. The voices of Mexican American women are important in considering the recommendations for practice. My recommendations for practice and research are based on the experiences of the seven participants relative to the overarching themes of racism, cultural

congruency, gender stereotyping, and superintendent school board relations. The subordinate patterns of support and strategy mechanisms, which included mentorship, social capital, and personal attributes of self-efficacy and confidence, risk taking traits, pre-established goals, and determination and perseverance outcomes are useful when considering new ideas for practice.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

In Texas, 76.7% of all teaching positions are held by women (Ramsay, 2013). The percentage of women in administrative positions does not correspond with the number of women in the educational work force; less than 20% of women hold the superintendent position in the United States, and the representation of Mexican American female superintendents is much smaller than any other ethnic group (Duwe & Mendez-Morse, 2010; Ortiz, 1981). At the time of this study, 233 superintendents were women and only 14 of those women were Hispanic. For the purpose of this study, I describe the current representation of Mexican American female superintendent as an umbrella. They are located and clustered in a unique geographic area of the state, thus their accomplishments in the superintendent role are isolated and not exposed to others. In particular, search consultants who have the ability to influence school boards members from other areas of the State to consider Mexican American women as desirable candidates for the superintendency. This study will provide school board members and search consultants with relevant data that demonstrates that ethnicity and/or gender should not be viewed as limitations for operating the superintendent role. The results of this study signify that there are well qualified Mexican American women who are proficient in performing the demanding duties of the superintendency. My desire is to be able to influence those

individuals with the authority to hire superintendents to reconsider their screening and hiring practices and to challenge the bias perceptions of what effective leadership looks like.

**Cultural suppression.** The underlying assumption of this study was grounded in feminist theory, and viewed through the lens of Chicana feminist thought. The framework of Chicana feminism was based on the critical view that “looks at inequalities along lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality as they affect women of Mexican descent in the United States” (Gallardo, 1996, p. 1). The second wave of the feminist movement in the United States included women of color challenging white feminist thought. They contended that the first-wave of feminism was conceptualized as homogenous “White and primarily middle class” (Roth, 2004, p. 2). Chicana feminists maintain that female experiences differ and Mexican American women have experienced multifaceted oppressions.

The stories from the participants exposed individual experiences of racism. Texas has sustained a history of individual social injustices stemming from discrimination against persons of color. Mexican American’s have experienced these discriminatory practices, which resulted in the segregation of schools, oppression of students, and unequal educational opportunities (Samora & Simon, 1977; Valencia, 1991). Chicano students have experienced persistent language suppression and cultural segregation (Valencia, 1991). The institutional practice of restricting the use of the Spanish language as a curricular vehicle was “intended to ensure the dominance of the English language and Anglo culture” (p. 6). The stories that Estrella and Rita shared regarding the educational inequalities they experienced exemplifies Valencia’s (1991) concept of

Mexican American oppression within an educational system that has historically failed to adequately meet the needs of second language learners. These were common practices in the Texas educational system. These stories ring true with my personal experiences. My father shared his experiences of being discriminated against and punished in school for speaking Spanish. He recounted an episode in first grade when he was not allowed to go to recess, but had to remain in the classroom while all the other students went out to play. The teacher went so far as to put tape on his mouth as a reminder that speaking Spanish was prohibited. Fortunately, because of federal and state accountability mandates and guidelines the educational opportunity for second language learners has improved. Federal and state agencies enforce and hold schools accountable for providing second language learners with research-based instruction that utilizes language acquisition theory for bilingual and ESL programs. However, as the results of this study uncovered, Hispanics continue to face challenges that are a direct result of past injustices.

Social justice principles call attention to these matters and provide the foundation on which superintendents can make organizational changes that will affect the next generation of students. Sprague (2005) asserted that the interaction of gender, race/ethnicity, and class “is a key organizer of social life” and understanding of how these interactions work will “allow feminists to make the social world more equitable” (p.3). Educational leadership programs can assist in this effort by preparing public school administrators to become change agents in the schools they lead by bringing attention to the system wide challenges that are related to racial, gender, and ethnic biases. Conversations about race and gender are difficult and uncomfortable for some people, but until these conversations begin, the status quo will remain the same and women of color

will continue to face challenges in educational administration. I recommend creating educational leadership classes that place an emphasis in celebrating diversity by providing aspiring superintendents from other ethnicity groups with a comprehensive awareness of the cultural influences that Latinas experience and how these cultural influences affect the leadership characteristics of Mexican American women. This study provides ample data regarding personal traits of Mexican American female superintendents and how these women utilized their cultural backgrounds to overcome the foreseeable barriers that are related to gender and/or ethnicity. By providing future superintendents from all ethnicity groups with a mindfulness of the customary biases that continue to exist within the organizations of schools, gradual transformation will occur and the entry to exclusiveness of superintendency will be accessible to the atypical aspiring superintendent.

**Representation of Mexican American female superintendents.** My goal for this study is to motivate and inspire Mexican American women to pursue the superintendency and provide them with the resources that adequately prepare them to successfully obtain the superintendency. This study demonstrates the need to increase the representation of Mexican American females superintendents. However, in order for this to occur, the overall percentage of Mexican American women in educational administration positions needs to grow. Without an upsurge in the number of Mexican American women in various levels of educational administration, Mexican American women will continue to have limited access to the superintendency. The participants of this study acknowledged that barriers for aspiring Mexican American female administrators exist. The participants' experiences of successfully navigating the

administrative career ladder and successfully reaching their goals for obtaining the superintendency will influence other Latina's to continue to pursue their career aspirations.

It is essential for current school leaders to identify potential Latina administrators early in their educational careers and actively sponsor their progression within the organizational career ladder. The superintendents in this study had set their career goals for the superintendency at the beginning of their administrative career. They sought out the necessary support and mentoring from individuals who had the knowledge and skills which assisted them to successfully achieve their career goals. Mexican American women need unrestrained support from their supervisors who have the ability to inspire them to pursue administrative positions. My personal experiences in administration exposed me to the common practice of placing an emphasis on the importance of retaining well qualified teachers in the classroom. Customarily, campus principals and human resource departments tend to create incentives to keep effective teachers in the classroom because of their ability to increase student performance. Although this is important, it is equally important to encourage effective Latina teachers to pursue their administrative credentials and aspire to the superintendency. My advice to current school leaders is to critique their leadership style and to begin to adapt leadership expectations that match the characteristics of collectivism that is traditionally instilled in Mexican American women. That is their social values are "integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, that "protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" ( Hofstede, 2010, p. 515). This study provides current and future superintendents with an understanding of the

cultural influences that impact the characteristics of Mexican American female leadership and will serve as a guide for promoting the advancement of Latina educators.

**Perceptions of fit.** “In the eyes of the hiring panel, you just didn’t fit” (Tooms, Lugg, & Bogotch, 2010). Tooms, et al (2010) critiqued the customary perception of “fit” which is commonly used in educational leadership by asserting “that our measures of fit in terms of leadership are one dimensional” and this places limitations on individuals from diverse backgrounds (p. 102). The results of this study suggest that the politics of fit is a common barrier for Latinas, thus they are being overlooked for administrative positions in areas of the state that do not have an understanding of the cultural traits Mexican American women possess. My presumption is that Mexican American women are being judged by their interaction with the hiring committee during the interview process and are overlooked for administrative positions because hiring committees have a misguided perception of what a school leader looks and acts like because they lack exposure to diverse leadership. Tallerico (2000) spoke about the “unwritten rules” in screening practices by search consultants and how the “hypervaluing of the interpersonal chemistry” between the superintendent candidate and school board members places ambiguities for women of color who are not like the hiring panel (p. 108).

It is important to continue to examine the perceptions of hiring panels and challenge their mindsets as to what best fit or not fit looks like. Without the increase in the representation of Latina administrators, mainstream school communities’ perceptions of what school leadership looks like will continue to support the status quo. School board members should be willing to take risks and stray from what one participant referred to as their “security blanket” when considering potential superintendent candidates. School

districts need to critique their hiring practices and ask themselves “Are well qualified Mexican American women being overlooked for the superintendent position, if so why?”

This study will provide search consultants with alternative examples of what effective school leadership looks like and will impact the misguided perceptions of school communities that have yet to consider Hispanic women as their district leader.

**Just do it.** The results of this study implies that aspiring Mexican American female superintendents can predict the likelihood of their appointment to the superintendency in certain school districts based on the demographics and location of the school district. My intent is to challenge the current status quo and inspire Mexican American women to become risk takers when applying for the superintendency. Mexican American women need to be encouraged and persuaded in becoming opportunists and being the trailblazers for others by actively seeking superintendent positions with school districts that differ from their cultural backgrounds. They need to be given opportunities to acquire the guidance and sponsorship that will assist them in establishing the social capital that is needed in gaining access to the superintendency, particularly with school districts that have yet to hire a Mexican American female superintendent.

This study revealed the impact of cultural influences for Mexican American women and how those influences shaped their leadership attributes and steered their decisions for seeking the superintendency. Some of the advice that the participants of this study had for others was “take a leap of faith” and “just do it.” Their stories of perseverance included overcoming obstacles early on in their careers, yet they remained determined to reach their ultimate career goal. My advice to Mexican American women actively seeking the superintendency is to prepare themselves in undertaking an

“individualist” approach in their pursuit. Individualist tends to compartmentalize their relationships and they need detailed background information to get to know new members of their “in-groups” (Hofstede, 2010). Their communication style tends to be brief, direct, and getting their point across. These individualist tactics can contradict their cultural identity of “collectivism” which has been endorsed by traditional cultural influences. Some Latina’s are accustomed to being recognized before speaking, providing ambiguous and indirect responses, focused on preserving harmony and their response will appear to the individualist as not linked to the topic (Hofstede, 2010). An individualist approach includes displaying a strong sense of self-efficacy and confidence, which may appear boastful in our Hispanic collectivist culture and is frowned upon. But, this attitude is considered an asset in individualist societies (Anzaldúa, 1987; Hofstede, 2010). The participants in this study asserted themselves during their interviews as confident Mexican American women capable of navigating the superintendency role. They were direct in their responses and proclaimed their ability to move the school districts forward. They expressed their confidence in their ability to improve educational programs for all students. Rita said, “I am good at what I do...I know what to do.” Gabriella stated, “I had excellent curriculum experience...I know what I am doing.” Mexican American women need to understand that being able to obtain the superintendency may mean displaying multiple aspects themselves. Ultimately, the desired traits of the candidate vary depending on what the community deems is to be the best “fit” for the superintendency (Tooms, 2010).

The information from this study will provide Mexican American women with the capacity to challenge the standard perception of fit. Educational leadership programs

need to prepare Mexican American women with a clear understanding that perceptions of educational leadership are “socially constructed” and the use of the term fit “has remained stagnant” (Tooms, 2010, p.102). However, this study will provide educational leadership programs with a new theoretical framework for classroom instruction that provides not only Latinas, but future superintendents from diverse groups with the information that will assist them in examining their own perceptions of what leadership is and embrace other cultural influences. The stories of the seven superintendents is a testament that the attainment of the superintendency for Mexican American women is reachable and that biases related to gender and/or ethnicity do not have to be a barrier in the quest for the superintendency.

**Role of mentorship and/or sponsorship.** This study corroborated earlier research on the tremendous influence that mentorship and sponsorship has in gaining access to the superintendency. The participants shared having support from mentors and/or sponsors prior to obtaining they superintendency. However, the results of the study also found that the women lacked peer mentors once they were in the superintendent position, which can be a drawback for a new superintendent. In this study, I differentiated between mentorship and sponsorship, deferring to Kowalski’s (2006) definitions. Kowalski defines mentorship as providing encouragement, career related advice, friendship, and/or the development of confidence and trust between a person or persons and another individual seeking mentoring; by comparison, sponsorship is the creation of professional opportunities for others by initiating opportunities that help overcome social and political barriers for certain members of a group.

The women who obtained the superintendency sooner than anticipated had the support of a mentor and/or sponsor and had received career support from a mentor throughout their administrative careers. The data analysis revealed that gender or ethnicity did not reduce the effectiveness of mentorship, but rather the form of support that was received was influential in the participants' progression within the educational career ladder. It is also important for educational leadership programs to have an established and effective mentorship program to provide support for aspiring superintendents. Providing ongoing mentorship and support from mentors and/or sponsors who understand the complexity of the role will provide the opportunities that are needed for aspiring Mexican American female superintendents and connect them with the critical information exclusive to the superintendency

Educational leadership programs can assist aspiring Mexican American female superintendents by connecting them with sponsors who have the exclusive know-how and ability to infiltrate the "good ole boy" system to gain access to the superintendency (Benham, 1997, p. 295). This study affirmed that women who have mentors throughout their educational administrative career are able to move into school district leadership positions sooner than those who are without mentorship (Dana & Bourisaw, 2006).

**Faculty role models.** Castellanas and Jones (2003) report that only 2% of all faculty members are comprised of Latina/os and only 36% of those are women. Contreras and Gandra (2006) claim that the majority of Latina/o faculty members are disproportionately represented among the lecturer and instructor categories which are within the lower levels of the academic rank, thus gives Latino faculty "little voice in university policies and practices" (p. 105). With the underrepresentation of Latina faculty members

there are few role models who have similar cultural backgrounds for Latina's in doctoral programs. Universities and colleges claim to be actively recruiting faculty members from diverse backgrounds, however the above mentioned studies reveal that there are low percentages of Latinas who have doctoral degrees, thus the reality is that the pool among Mexican American women with doctorate degrees is scarce (Contreras & Jones, 2006). Which has an impact on providing role models to aspiring Mexican American female superintendents. It is important to aggressively and proactively recruit Mexican American female faculty members by encouraging Latina doctoral candidates to pursue faculty positions. Strategic long term goals for recruiting diversity among faculty needs to take place. Current faculty members should provide Latina students with ongoing opportunities to network within the higher education arena and expose them with a variety of opportunities to present at national conferences. Short term goals can consist of utilizing current faculty members regardless of gender or ethnicity to serve as mentors and sponsors to aspiring Mexican American women in doctoral programs. This study will assist in providing current faculty members with a thorough understanding of Mexican American female superintendents experiences and how their cultural backgrounds affect cultural congruency and/or incongruency in the superintendent role. It is important to understand common leadership characteristics among Mexican American women.

**Mentorship after the superintendency.** Grogan (1996) spoke of the need of mentors in order to increase the number of women in the superintendency. The lack of mentoring for Mexican American women at the superintendency level creates challenges for successfully navigating the high demands of the superintendency. Current and retired Mexican American female superintendents are needed as mentors for newly appointed

Latina superintendents because they can provide insight in the functioning of the superintendent role. These seven women are potential role models for other Mexican American women seeking the superintendency. Their personal attributes of self-efficacy and confidence, determination and perseverance, and risks taking traits serve as strategy models for other women. Their voices are powerful tools for educational preparation programs and educational leadership programs.

Implementing programs that connect newly appointed Mexican American female superintendents with mentors, no matter the gender or ethnicity is necessary in providing guidance to newly appointed Mexican American female superintendents.

**Avoiding burnout.** One final implication for practice that needs to be discussed is burnout. The participants of this study spoke of experiencing burnout at some point in their administrative career. In order to retain well qualified and effective Latina school leaders it is vital to provide them with the support systems that prevent them from experiencing burnout which is associated with the complexity of educational administration. Gabriella and Rita both shared their personal experiences with burnout as a result of the high demands of their administrative careers. They spoke of the “politics” associated with the organization of schools and how this affected their ability to navigate their administrative roles. The stories of the superintendents in this study have provided me with a new sense of encouragement. Both Gabriella and Rita were able to take time off from educational administration and returned to K-12 schools as the superintendent with a stronger sense of self efficacy. Their strong sense of self efficacy and confidence empowered them in their ability to successfully navigate the superintendency. Their

experiences will validate to others that perseverance and determination pay off and that Latina school leaders can be the catalyst for change and school improvement.

### **Recommendations for Research**

A vast amount of insight was obtained as result of the study. It adds to the knowledge concerning the lack of Mexican American female superintendents. However, several areas for potential future research emerged from this study and knowledge about Mexican American female administrators need to be explored further.

**Gender and ethnic biases.** White males have historically dominated the superintendency and the literature disclosed that women must overcome barriers related to traditional sex-role stereotypes anytime they enter traditionally male dominated careers (Brunner, 1999, 2000, 2002; Blount, 1996; Grogan, 1996, 2005; Galloway, 2006; Tallerico, 2005). The review of literature indicated that Mexican American women encountered barriers related to both gender and ethnicity when seeking the superintendency (Couch, 2007; Gonzalez, 2007). The participants in this study affirmed that barriers associated to gender and/or ethnicity continues to exist for aspiring Mexican American female superintendents. This study will aid in altering biases related to gender and ethnicity by exposing the positive impact that the Mexican American female superintendents of this study have had in their school districts.

Quilantan (2004) asserted that Mexican American women were conscious that some school districts may consider them less desirable candidates. The participants in this study did not speak of seeking the superintendent position in other areas of the state, thus it is not evident from the data if they perceived that some school districts would consider them less desirable candidates. The data from this study did not disclose whether

other Mexican American women encounter barriers related to ethnicity and gender while actively seeking the superintendency in the other regions of the State. This is a topic that would benefit from further investigation by collecting additional data from aspiring Mexican American female superintendents who have actively sought out the superintendent position, but have not been successful in obtaining the superintendency in the other regions of the State.

**School district match.** Texas demographics are rapidly changing and by 2040 the Hispanic population is predicted to increase to 66.3% (Texas Data Center, 2008). The changes in school demographics affect the cultural and societal influences in schools. Therefore, it is crucial to recruit Mexican American female superintendents for other areas of the state. It is not evident whether Mexican American women in other areas of the state who are seeking the position and encountering barriers, or actively seeking the superintendency. The lack of representation of Mexican American female superintendents needs further investigation. Collecting additional data on aspiring Mexican American female superintendents may answer the following questions that arise as a result of the study: 1) are current Mexican American female school administrators actively seeking the superintendency? 2) Are there impediments that prevent them from gaining access to the superintendency? And, 3) how can current Latina school administrators be motivated to prepare and seek the superintendency?

The overall intent of this study is to change the mindset of individual biases related to gender and ethnicity and impact perceptions of search consultants and school boards as they seek and recruit superintendents to lead their school systems. This study will provide educational leadership programs with a new perspective regarding the

preparation of Latina educational leaders. This report provides important data to school district board members who are seeking change agents for their school district. The results of this study revealed the superintendents in this study as effective change agents and their capacity to fix. This study revealed that the superintendents in this inquiry were effective change agents with the capacity to fix troubled school systems.

My hope for this study is that search consultants will use the data from this study to train school board members to take risks, stray away from their “security blankets,” understand Latina cultural influences, and view Mexican American female administrators as potential superintendents with the ability to be strong school district leaders. This research will serve as a new reference point for educational leadership programs as they prepare Mexican American females for the principalship and the superintendency.

In addition, the research on Latina superintendents remains limited on a national level. Other states with large percentages of Hispanics, such as California and New Mexico have limited representation by Latina superintendents. The experiences of other Latina superintendents in those states would provide educational leadership programs with a variety of experiences from other Latina superintendents.

The voices of seven Mexican American female superintendents will contribute to the knowledge base associated with issues of gender and ethnicity in educational leadership. The experiences of these women challenge male-centered theory. This study has the potential of impacting how educational leadership programs prepare future Mexican American female superintendents by providing them the tools in obtaining well thought out strategies and support mechanism that were modeled by the seven participants of this study. The real world experiences, knowledge, and perceptions of

these Mexican American female superintendents will be a positive contribution to the current theoretical perspectives of educational leadership.

### **Limitations of Study**

This research captured the stories of seven extraordinary Mexican American female superintendents. I was fortunate to be able to get seven women to participate in the study, and am pleased to add to the limited research on this topic. These seven Mexican American female superintendents bring to the superintendent position resources associated with their gender, ethnicity and personal traits. This study adds seven more voices of Mexican American female superintendents to the literature, and provides a better understanding of their experiences.

There were, however, limitations to the study. The first was the sample size. There were 14 female Mexican American female superintendents at the time of the study, but only seven of those women were able to contribute to the study. Although this study yielded rich detailed experiences of those seven Mexican American female superintendents, it cannot be assumed that this phenomenon is representative of other Mexican American women, nor other women of color.

The second limitation is that the study was from the lens of an individual researcher with a Chicana feminist perspective with preconceived biases. Therefore, the final analysis was examined through that lens, thus a researcher with a different background most likely would interpret the data from a different perspective. I remained cognizant of my biases and attempted not to incorporate personal biases while examining the experiences of the participants. I continued to examine these biases during the data collection and data analysis process. Denzin (2009) insists that “stories can always be

told in different ways” and “all texts are biased productions” (p. 99). The practicality is that there cannot be an absolute unbiased interpretation of what I deem as impressive stories from unique women. I regard these women as extraordinary, because they are exclusive in their field and they demonstrate to other Latinas the capacity to achieve our goals. There will always be different versions of the story, even when the same site is studied by others (Denzin, 2009).

A final limitation was the research method and approach. Qualitative research is limited by the inability to replicate a study with different participants and different settings or even with the same participants at a later time. The phenomenological inquiry focused on the meanings of the experiences of these seven Mexican American women from their perspectives at the time of the study, it cannot be assumed that their perspectives would have remained the same in a different setting or at a different point in time. The life stories of the seven superintendents revealed similarities in their goals for the superintendency and the obtainment and operation of the superintendency.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

This study commends the accomplishments of seven unique and extraordinary women and credits all they have to offer to other Latinas. Their willingness to participate and share their life stories is a testament of their commitment and dedication to help others. Their success provides hope to the next generation of Mexican American female school administrators. Their stories demonstrate to other Latinas that their dreams of reaching the highest rank of educational leadership can be a reality. When I began this investigation, I was apprehensive that I was not going to be able to locate enough Mexican American female superintendents to participate in my study. I was motivated to

complete this inquiry after locating 14 Mexican American female superintendents and was moved when seven of those women responded so quickly and favorably to my invitation for the study. My experience with these women and discovering their notable talents has changed my outlook for the future. They have taught me that perseverance, determination, and conviction pays off. I have been inspired and believe that we (Latinas) do have the ability to influence future generations of school leaders and we are the catalyst for change.

My vision for change is to continue to examine this phenomenon and contribute to the much needed literature on this topic. This inquiry has taught me to believe in my capacity to make a larger contribution to educational leadership by sharing these stories with others. I am compelled to continue to critically examine preconceptions regarding educational leadership which places limitations on individuals needed for school improvement. I yearn for the opportunity to share the lessons that I have learned. My goals are to serve as a leader, mentor, and role model to aspiring Latina, Hispanic, Mexican American, and Chicana (however they chose to identify themselves) school administrators. I want to be able to provide them with the resources that will allow them to reach their career goals and encourage them to seek the highest ranks of educational administration. The completion of this dissertation and a doctoral degree has provided me with the confidence that I lacked on the onset of the doctoral program. As I reflect back, I am astonished that I was able to accomplish this. I am privileged to have had the opportunity of being mentored by amazing professors who inspired me in accomplishing my dreams and I am convinced that I will be able to inspire others to pursue theirs.

## APPENDIX SECTION

### APPENDIX A

#### LETTER TO SUPERINTENDENTS

Dear Superintendent

My name is Sonia Rodriguez, a doctoral student at Texas State University. I am conducting research on Mexican American female superintendents in the State of Texas for my dissertation. My research interest is finding relevant personal and professional information regarding the educational leadership experiences of Mexican American female superintendents. I have reviewed the Texas Education Agency School District directory and you were listed as one of the 14 Hispanic female superintendents in the State of Texas. I am interested in interviewing you for this study. Your information will have important implications for superintendent preparation programs, will be of immense value to other Mexican American women seeking educational leadership positions, and will enrich the literature on this topic.

I am attaching a survey, which will give me general information about you and your current position. Please complete the survey and return it to me via email. An electronic copy of the survey is available in Dropbox at <http://db.tt/1XeOIxiZ>, if you prefer. All information collected will be treated with extreme confidentiality. Please contact me at 512-663-4571 or email me at [sr1037@txstate.edu](mailto:sr1037@txstate.edu), if you have any questions.

Thank you for your time and consideration

Sonia Rodriguez

**APPENDIX B**  
**SURVEY**

**Demographic Information**

1. Do you view yourself as Latino or Hispanic? \_\_\_\_\_
  - a. Please indicate your ethnicity.

<input type="checkbox"/> Mexican American	<input type="checkbox"/> Cuban	<input type="checkbox"/> Puerto Rican
<input type="checkbox"/> Dominican	<input type="checkbox"/> South American	<input type="checkbox"/> Other

\_\_\_\_\_
  - b. Generation?  1<sup>st</sup>     2<sup>nd</sup>     3<sup>rd</sup>     4<sup>th</sup>     Other  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Please indicate your age range.

<input type="checkbox"/> less than 30	<input type="checkbox"/> 31-41	<input type="checkbox"/> 42-51
<input type="checkbox"/> 52-61	<input type="checkbox"/> 62 or older	
3. Please indicate your marital status.

<input type="checkbox"/> Married	<input type="checkbox"/> Single	<input type="checkbox"/> Divorced
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4. Do you have children? Yes No
  - a. If yes, please indicate how many children are living at home

<input type="checkbox"/> 0	<input type="checkbox"/> 1-2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3+
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5. Please indicate the highest degree earned.

<input type="checkbox"/> Bachelors	<input type="checkbox"/> Masters	<input type="checkbox"/> Doctorate
<input type="checkbox"/> Specialist	<input type="checkbox"/> Other	
6. How many years of experience do you have in public education

<input type="checkbox"/> less than 10	<input type="checkbox"/> 10-20	<input type="checkbox"/> 21-30
<input type="checkbox"/> 31+		
7. Is this your first superintendency? Yes No
  - a. If No, how many other superintendent positions have you held? \_\_\_\_\_

- b. How many years do you have in your present position? \_\_\_\_\_
- c. How many total years of experience do you have as a superintendent? \_\_\_\_\_

**Tell me more about the school district you work for.**

- 8. What is the total student enrollment? \_\_\_\_\_
- 9. Please provide the percentages for the following student ethnicity groups.  
Anglo \_\_\_\_\_%   Hispanic \_\_\_\_\_%   African American \_\_\_\_\_%   Asian \_\_\_\_\_%  
Other \_\_\_\_\_%
- 10. What are the percentages of students receiving free and reduced lunches?  
\_\_\_\_\_%

**APPENDIX C**

**POTENTIAL STUDY PARTICIPANT FORM**

Name  
Superintendent  
School District  
Address  
City, State, Zip Code

**Please mark one of the two statements below.**

I am:  
\_\_\_\_\_ willing to participate in this study of Mexican American Female  
superintendents.

\_\_\_\_\_ NOT willing to participate in this study of Mexican American female  
superintendents

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Thank you very much for your cooperation**

**APPENDIX D**  
**INTERVIEW GUIDE**

**Purpose of Study:**

This study will describe the educational leadership experiences of Mexican American female superintendents.

**Research Questions:**

- (1) What have been the experiences of Mexican American women while seeking and operating within the superintendency?
- (2) What factors motivate Mexican American females to actively seek the superintendent position?
- (3) What strategies and supports are available to Mexican American females as they seek and retain a superintendent's position?

**Interview Guide:**

**A. Career History**

*I am interested in learning about you, your motivation for seeking the superintendency, and how it is that you have reached your current administrative position?*

**Other questions to consider:**

- Tell me about your working/teaching experiences? Tell me about your advancement from teaching to educational leadership?
- Describe your educational leadership positions prior to the superintendency?
- Tell me why you decided to pursue the superintendency? What motivated you to actively seek a superintendent position?

- Tell me about your superintendent certification program? What program did you attend? When did you complete your certification? Were there any other women in your certification program? Where were there other Mexican American women? Do you know if they have obtained a superintendent position?

## **B. Becoming a Superintendent**

*I would like to know everything you went through in becoming a superintendent. Please describe your experience in becoming a superintendent. This may include incidents about first learning about a superintendent position, your applying for the position, being interviewed, and being selected for the position. Please take a few moments to focus on that and then describe that experience as fully as you possibly can.*

### Other questions to consider

- How many school districts did you apply for and how many interviews did you have before being selected for this position?
- Why did you apply to these school districts? Do you believe that other applicants viewed the superintendency for these districts as an attractive position to attain?
- What was the gender and ethnicity of the board members of the school districts that you interviewed for? What was the gender/ethnicity of the board president? Do you feel that your gender or ethnicity positively or negatively impacted school board/boards' decisions to hire you? Please explain.
- What was your impression of the school districts you interviewed for? What dimensions, incidents, people intimately connected to the experience stand out for you? Were there signs of district instability?
- How did these experiences affect you? What feelings were generated from the experience? What changes do you associate with the experience?
- Is there anything more you would like to share about the experience?

### **C. Strategies and Resources**

*I would like to know about any support systems that exist for you and how were you able to draw upon these while seeking and obtaining the superintendent position? Please tell me about any strategies or resources you consider to be important to you and why?*

#### Other possible questions

- Was there anyone who encouraged you to seek the superintendency? Please tell me about anyone you consider to be a mentors or sponsor?
- What resources were available to you when you were seeking the position?
- What type of support did you receive from family members, husband, or children, parents, etc? How about friends or co-workers?
- What type of support is in place for you now? Tell me about individuals that you consider to be mentors now. What other resources are available to you in your current position?

### **D. Cultural Influences**

*I would like to know more about your upbringing, your family, and any cultural influences that you believe shaped your identity as a Latina (Mexican American) and educational leader.*

- Tell me about your childhood and family, how many siblings do you have? Where did you grow up? Where did your parents grow up?
- Tell me about your educational experiences? What was your experience like in early education? What were some of your most memorable experiences in college? When did you decide to pursue education? When did you decide to go into educational leadership?

- Is there someone who had an impact on your career? Did you have role models, mentors, during your early years, college, teaching positions and administrative career?

#### **E. Challenges/Barriers**

*I am interested in learning about any challenges or barriers that you may have experienced throughout your administrative career which has impacted your role as a superintendent. Please take time to reflect on your experiences and describe any barriers that you feel existed for you while seeking the superintendency and with your current position. These barriers could be associated with career path, gender role expectations, hiring practices of school boards, hierarchal structure of school systems, school district stability, demands of the job, and etc. How were you able to overcome any barriers while seeking the superintendency and successfully obtain your current position? What motivated you to continue to seek the position?*

#### Other possible questions

- Do you believe your gender or ethnicity helped or hindered your ability to access the superintendency? Why? What kind of challenges or barriers, if any, did you experience?
- Why do you think there are few Latina (Mexican American) female superintendents?
- Why do you think other Latinas (Mexican American) are successful in obtaining the position? What recommendations to you have for other Mexican American women aspiring to the superintendency?
- Why did you want to be a superintendent? What are the best aspects of the job? Which are the most rewarding? Least rewarding?
- Is there anything else about your experiences as a superintendent you would like to share?

**APPENDIX E**  
**CONSENT FORM**

The purpose of this research project is to explore the personal experiences of Mexican American females who have been successful in obtaining the superintendent position. You are listed in the Texas Education Agency School District directory as a female superintendent. Your participation in this study will be of immense value to other Mexican American women seeking a superintendent position and will enrich the literature on this topic. The data for this study will be collected through surveys, interviews and observations. The survey has 10 questions seeking general demographic information. In addition to the survey, each participant is asked to participate in a face to face or Skype interview with the researcher. There are 19 interview questions and the interview will last approximately 1 hour. The study is not funded and is part of a dissertation project for partial fulfillment of a doctoral degree with Texas State University. If you have any questions you may contact the researcher, Sonia Rodriguez by telephone at 512-663-4571, email [soniaarlenorodriguez@satx.rr.com](mailto:soniaarlenorodriguez@satx.rr.com), or mailing address , 8011 Eagle Peak, San Antonio, Texas 78923.

This project **EXP2013F835** was approved by the Texas State IRB on April 26, 2013. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Jon Lasser (512-245-3413 - [lasser@txstate.edu](mailto:lasser@txstate.edu)) and to Becky Northcut, Director, Research Integrity & Compliance (512-245-2314 - [bnorthcut@txstate.edu](mailto:bnorthcut@txstate.edu))

- By completing this consent form you agree to participate in the study and understand that your participation in this research project is voluntary and that

you may withdraw from the project at any time without prejudice or jeopardy with Texas State University.

- You may choose not to answer any question for any reason.
- All collected data is confidential and there are no risks.
- The names of participants and school districts will remain anonymous and pseudo names will be used in the report.
- All data records will remain in a locked filing cabinet and in a password protected computer where only the researcher has access.
- All survey data and audio recordings remain on file for 5 years.
- The summary of the findings will be provided to participants upon completion of the study, if requested.

**Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated.**

I have read the consent form and I agree to participate in this research project. I grant permission to, Sonia Rodriguez, to conduct the interview and complete the analysis and reporting of data in association with her dissertation for Texas State University.

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of participant

Date

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

District \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number \_\_\_\_\_

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