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RECEIVED 06 April 2023

ACCEPTED 20 June 2023

PUBLISHED 29 August 2023

CITATION

Salazar Montoya LC and Kew K (2023)
Marianismo and the changing role of Latinas in
educational leadership. *Front. Educ.* 8:1201698.
doi: 10.3389/feduc.2023.1201698

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Marianismo and the changing role of Latinas in educational leadership

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This article focuses on the testimonios of accomplished Latina school leaders, shedding light on their upbringing, familial responsibilities, generational poverty, and commitment to challenge the prevailing narrative and break through institutional barriers. We provide an overview of how they shaped and navigated their professional careers despite various barriers and how they blazed new trails for future generations. Cultural norms, familial responsibilities, and uncommon mentorship models for Latina school leaders are discussed. These leaders often missed family gatherings and children's events but had found ways to balance work and life and care for their loved ones. They acted as role models of professional success for their family, friends, and colleagues. They were windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors for those needing their support.

Recommendations: The women in our research serve as mentors (referred to as femtors) to other women in their fields. Through their achievements, they challenge and overcome the glass ceilings imposed by hegemonic systemic structures that favor and maintain existing social hierarchies by breaking through them. These structures often contribute to the marginalization of certain groups. Our findings from these testimonios fully capture the authenticity and essence of the participants' lived experiences while utilizing a feminist framework to construct research. The themes that emerged include (1) fostering a professional community linking one to other educational professionals, (2) participating in structured mentorship development programs throughout your career, (3) remaining a lifelong learner, (4) fostering professional relationships, and (5) remaining confident yet humble, and being one's authentic self. Finally, as the former Chancellor of New York Schools, Richard Carranza, often says, "Do not get lost trying to keep your job that you forget to do your job." Our research delves into how these factors have led to their professional success and positioned them at the forefront of their fields. The pathways of the women in this study were similar in that their decisions led to positions of authority, namely superintendency, and gaining recognition for breaking through the traditional glass ceiling. We must consider whether generations of Latinas did not pursue careers or leadership positions outside their homes due to what they felt were their cultural and family obligations. Many agree that *marianismo* has prevented Latinas from reaching their goals.

KEYWORDS

Latinas, school leadership, superintendency, marianismo, gender inequality, mentorship

Introduction

This article discusses the effect of familial and cultural obligations on the career trajectory of working women who wish to traverse the school leadership pipeline. Far too often, we notice an imbalance in the statistics of women in school administrative leadership. The literature strongly supports the idea that many busy and capable women are raising families and obtaining degrees in their respective fields. However, “women continue to carry the familial/nurturing role” (Olsen, 2006, p. 6). Lindsay (2007) coined this phenomenon the “motherhood mandate” (p. 197). From this and our previous research, we have observed that the lived experiences and reflections of women who are trailblazers in their field help build the confidence of other women around them (Montoya, 2019; Salazar Montoya and Kew, 2020).

In contrast, men in leadership roles, whether married or divorced and have children, do not face the same career pathway challenges associated with their marital or parental status as women in similar circumstances. Therefore, motherhood and marital status serve as barriers for many women, especially Latinas. It is alarming that men seem less unaffected professionally by their parental or marital status.

Purpose statement

The career trajectory, responsibilities, and pathways paired with gendered expectations and oppressive systems contribute to the perpetuation of outdated, archaic, and patriarchal norms, particularly impacting women, including Latinas. Further, when women are hired, “she must be resourceful, fueled by challenges, assertive, and more intrinsically than extrinsically motivated” (Olsen, 2006, p. 8). Assertiveness can be easily misinterpreted as a weakness in women and misidentified as “bitchiness.” A study in the Wall Street Journal “found that women, on average, were disparaged more than men for identical assertive behaviors” (Williams, 2016, R3). The purpose of this research was to adjust the focus and share the stories of women who self-identify as Latinas, shedding light on their ongoing fight against cultural barriers and expectations. Furthermore, this research aimed to explore the concept of “Marianismo,” a term coined to provide a framework for understanding and contextualizing these experiences. This research aims to support Latinas navigating the leadership pipeline, and to fill an existing gap in the literature.

Theoretical framework

This scholarly article draws on Chicana/Latina feminist theories and methodological approaches as a lens to examine the ways that *testimonio* functions as a pedagogical tool to examine the lived experiences of Latina leaders. Chicana/Latina feminist scholarship has challenged the perspectives and ideologies of Eurocentric American culture by highlighting other[ed] sites and processes of knowledge production, such as the brown body and the home (Bernal, 1998; Cruz, 2001; Saavedra and Nymark, 2008; Saavedra, 2011). Within the institution of education, the theories and experiences of those in power have been privileged

and legitimized, while other[ed] epistemologies and theoretical frames have been devalued, dismissed, and silenced. As such, Chicana/Latina feminists have theorized that embodied knowledge is produced and shared among the bodies and generations of women of color to understand, critique, and intervene in the schooling of Latina/o students. Chicana/Latina feminist theoretical perspectives in education interrogate how Eurocentrism maintains dominant, oppressive ideologies embedded in schools and continues to position marginalized students in deficit-oriented ways (Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Yosso, 2005; Saavedra, 2011).

Testimonios

The research data for this study were collected through a series of testimonios obtained during both structured and unstructured platicas (informal conversations or discussions). Using these less common qualitative methods involves the utilization of “a Chicana/Latina feminist perspective in educational research that is more than just adopting a theoretical lens, becoming familiar with a (sic) literature, learning corresponding methods, and analyzing data. It embodies who we are and requires us to grapple with our activist-scholar role and embrace alternative ways of knowing” (Fierros and Bernal, 2016, p. 102).

Defining marianismo

Marianismo is a socio-historically situated Latino concept. In their book, *The Maria Paradox*, psychotherapists Gil and Vasquez (1996) stated that marianismo provided women with respect and protection within traditional societies, but “in today’s North America, marianismo is the invisible yoke that binds capable, intelligent, ambitious Latinas” (p. 7). In contemporary times, women continue to find themselves obligated to place their professional careers, ambitions, and authority on the back burner. Women, especially in Latino families, are often expected to follow a patriarchal way of life in which family and domestic responsibilities lie heavily on their shoulders. Gil and Vasquez (1996) presented the concept of *marianismo* in their work: “In today’s North America, *marianismo* is the invisible yoke which binds capable, intelligent, ambitious Latinas... to a no-win lifestyle” (p. 7).

Historically speaking

According to a plethora of resources, women in general and Latinas, in particular, often choose education as a career. Menchaca et al. (2016) have found in their research that education allows them to be active with their families while still meeting their desire to have a career. Latinas are indeed making strides in the workforce but are still far behind other women in the general population. “Studies should focus on gender norms and exposing how power and privilege have become naturalized in the contexts where research is taking place” (Menchaca et al., 2016, p. 4).

The leadership pipeline

The role of a school leader is comprehensive and demanding, and responsibilities include collective bargaining, personnel management, budget and finance oversight, policy development and implementation, effective communication with stakeholders, strategic planning, and instructional leadership (Callan and Levinson, 2011). The responsibility of school leaders is to ensure that an effective instructional program is provided to all students in their district (Mondragón and Stapleton, 2005). While there is no concrete pathway or pipeline to school leadership, either academic or professional, the job responsibilities are generally universal, regardless of the geographical location. According to Kowalski et al. (2011), the general career path to the superintendent is the teacher-to-principal approach. The main goal of feminist research and our research in particular is to fulfill “the political goal of aiming to redress gender imbalances and move a step closer towards bring about gender emancipation and equality” (Menchaca et al., 2016, p. 4).

Review of the literature

A traditional Latino gender role, marianismo (from Maria), expects women to emulate the Virgin Mary (Virgen Maria). Therefore, marianismo entails the veneration of female virginal purity, moral and spiritual superiority over men, and selfless motherhood. In other words, marianismo reveres chastity, other-directedness, self-sacrifice, and duty. According to Stevens (1973), Marianista women are expected to follow the cultural code, including modesty, compliance, nurturing, and being unassertive. In addition, marianismo centers Latina women as “Maria the *x*,” such as “Maria the Nanny,” “Maria the housekeeper,” or “Maria the cook,” forcing stereotypes on what Latinas are expected to be in society and placing them exclusively in service roles (Junco-Rivera, 2018).

Helene Cummins’s study frames the “Queen Bee” theme that emerged from this study. In addition, previous studies by Bowie (2007), Dellasega (2007) have revealed that unexpected moments of hurt and betrayal can arise even in environments where women feel safe and believe they are immune from harm and hostility. These instances can be triggered by a mere word or gesture rather than overt actions or behaviors, making them difficult to identify or define (Dellasega, 2007). Dellasega (2007) also explained that these small microaggressions could be more painful than a blow or physical interaction. According to researchers, this behavior is known as female relational aggression (RA), the subtle art of emotional devastation that occurs daily at home, at work, or in community settings.

Williams (2005) highlights the following: “The crucial point is that all women, non-mothers as well as mothers, are disadvantaged by a workplace that enshrines the ideal worker who starts to work in early adulthood and works, full-time and over time, for forty years straight” (p. 101). Cummins (2012) reminds us that work often parallels the demanding responsibilities of motherhood, creating structural challenges within their work-related roles. The societal demands placed upon them can hinder their ability to fully focus on the real needs of their academic profession.

Method and modes of inquiry

The data collected for this study utilized a triangulated approach. To build a strong foundation, an analysis of the existing literature springboarded this study, followed by the collection of data during *platicas* that occurred organically within the context of more structured interview questions. The authentic testimonios provided by the study participants served as the framework for the themes that emerged in this research.

Valle and Lydia (1978, p. 33) identified la *platica* as a “friendly, intimate, and mutualistic manner” of engaging in dialogue. Delgado Bernal et al. (2012), particularly their exploration of the power of testimonios, as demonstrated in the book *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios* by the Latina Feminist Group. This genre of testimonios has been recognized for its ability to expose brutality, challenge silencing, and foster solidarity among women of color (Anzaldúa, 1990).

Participant selection

Participants were selected for this study using a combination of purposeful sampling methods. Purposeful sampling is defined as selecting individuals who are likely to be aware of the subject being studied and fit the researchers’ pre-determined criteria and characteristics (McMillan and Schumacher, 2006; Creswell, 2012). Participants were selected using the following selection criteria: A participant had to be willing to engage in interviews comprising semi-structured questions that allowed participants to share as much or as little as they were comfortable sharing. The criterion-oriented identifiers for this study were the following:

- The participant identified herself as a Latina;
- The participant was or is enrolled at the university as a graduate student in the educational leadership degree program;
- The participant is or was an educator; and
- The participant was willing to share their lived experiences.

Data analysis

In this study, the researcher used summative content analysis, which is defined as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p. 1).

Matriarchal guilt

One of the main themes that emerged in this research was “matriarchal guilt.” The participants discussed their hesitation to take on a leadership role, often because of the mounting responsibilities expected of the position: extended workdays, year-round contracts, potentially longer commutes, or relocation. The professional expectations were cited as disruptions to their routines and cultural expectations. Finding balance was identified as a barrier and a deterrent for many of the participants. One participant noted that she would only accept a position that would

allow her to continue her maternal responsibilities. Nearly every participant discussed how education became a profession of choice because of their responsibilities as wives, mothers, and familial caretakers. This profession lent itself to their cultural and societal roles as caretakers, mothers, and homemakers while providing a livable wage.

Imposter syndrome

One could postulate that, while these Latinas have demonstrated their leadership abilities and professionalism, they continue to face colleagues and administrations that devalue their authenticity. Many of these Latinas have found that, as the only or one of only a handful of Latina leaders, they experience what academics call imposter syndrome. The term “imposter syndrome” was coined by psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes at Georgia State College in 1978. Women affected with this syndrome often feel defeated, defensive, and unmotivated to contribute their unique perspectives and talents again. A common observation is that Latinas are “invited to the dance, but never asked to dance” (unknown). The lack of affirmation, support, and mentorship leads to the development of both conscious and unconscious self-doubt and imposter syndrome.

Working in a beehive

Existing research reminds us that when women are hired, “She must be resourceful, fueled by challenges, assertive, and more intrinsically than extrinsically motivated” (Olsen, 2006, p. 8). This work climate then fosters competitive crabs in a hot-pot work culture. Women compete for a seat at the table, often taking risks, compromising integrity, and doing what it takes to get to the top. While this does not apply to every work setting, it was cited as a recurring theme by participants and supported by previous research and literature. “My colleagues often failed to cheer me on or to support my professional growth,” stated one of our participants, and the premise was stated by all of them.

Agents of change

The participants of this study elected to navigate the leadership pipeline, and when they were asked about their why, one participant summed it up like this: “Being visible to that community, making them feel welcome, making them feel valued, and also working with teachers as well, and all the stakeholders involved, and really giving them that opportunity to just do better, and make better decisions, and really focus on what equity is. There are a lot of people have a misconception of what that looks like and what it should look like. And, so that would be just my vision for myself as a school leader” (participant M).

Results/conclusion

The narratives and stories provided are evidence from participants’ lived experiences, whereby they framed a profile of what a highly successful Latina navigating the leadership pipeline

may entail. These women explained their commitment to working long hours, performing and exceeding job expectations, resiliency, and challenging gender norms and expectations. These women are pushing historical boundaries, gaining confidence, mentoring, and supporting other Latinas. One participant stated, “We are very underrepresented in many areas, even though we’re the minority majority, we’re still not recruited, you know, we’re not taken into consideration and then at some points were all lumped the same. So even though I’m Latina, there’s more aspects to being a Latina than just grouping us together in stereotypes that have oppressed Latinas for years!”

In conclusion, we can make significant progress and shift the prevailing narrative by establishing leadership development programs that prioritize inclusivity and mindfulness. It is crucial to extend support and allocate resources to Latinas vying for school leadership positions, going beyond merely written policies and public relations initiatives. Educational leadership programs can greatly benefit from supporting recruitment initiatives, offering robust professional development, and conducting extensive research that promotes inclusive, equitable, and nurturing programming. This requires colleges and universities to rethink and transform their practices. A mantra we often share is, “You don’t know what you don’t know.” Latinas need to be encouraged, empowered, and recruited. This simple yet powerful approach opens doors to opportunities, pathways, and professional growth. The participants of this study exemplify the experiences of many Latinas who are first-generation college graduates, English Language Learners, and often family breadwinners.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required for the study involving human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent to participate in this study was not required in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct, and intellectual contribution to the work and approved it for publication.

Acknowledgments

This work is a project that will be many years in the making. There are so few Latina women who enter the leadership pipeline nationally and getting honest, and authentic responses can be difficult. Women who finally reach the board room fear speaking too loudly and often move through the pipeline as quietly as possible to avoid risking their professional safety and security. Special thanks to those who have embraced their authenticity

and shared their personal career experiences with us over the years!

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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