The Power of Mentoring for Women of Color

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of school leaders and the role of mentoring relationships in their careers. This study showed that informal mentoring relationships are essential to the promotion of women of color. Most of the mentoring relationships were established through close work with their immediate supervisors. This study suggests having informal mentors facilitated Latina women's aspirations to become school leaders and counteract the pattern of underrepresentation of Latinas in such roles.

1. Introduction

In education, 26.7 percent of superintendents are women. However, Latinas represent less than one percent of the total population of school superintendents — the highest leadership position one can obtain in K-12 schools [1]. The limited representation of Latinas in leadership positions does not mirror the rapid growth of the Latino population. Latinos are increasing in population share and are expected to grow from 62 million in 2022 to 111 million by 2060 [2]. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics shows that, between the fall of 2009 and the fall of 2020, the K-12 Latino student enrollment grew from 11 million to 14.1 million, representing an increment of 28 percent. By contrast, African American and White student enrollment decreased and is projected to continue declining over the next few years [3].

The research literature on educational leadership has extensively examined the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles. First, for many women, the lack of female role models and mentors serves as a barrier to perceiving administrative positions as an attainable career goal. [4] Similarly, the challenge of creating work-life balance has been noted as a restrictive factor for women as family commitments and time constraints limit women's ability to raise children while maintaining a career [4]. Additionally, other researchers have attributed the problem to the absence of socialization, inclusion, access to information, social networks, and resources for women [5].

Ortiz and Marshall [6] described the lack of minority women in leadership as an exclusive area to enter and be successful. Nevertheless, several Latinas have successfully entered and remained in administrative roles, but little is known about their experiences while pursuing school administrator roles. This investigation paid specific attention to the role of mentors in their professional trajectories.

2. Background

Mentoring is the relationship between a less experienced person and a person in power who can teach, encourage, and facilitate the advancement of the less experienced person, who is also known as a protegee [7] [8]. Mentors are typically regarded as individuals with advanced experience who offer career development, such as exposure protection, sponsorship, coaching, visibility, and leadership [7]. They also provide psychosocial benefits related to self-esteem, confidence, sense of capability, and acceptance of younger individuals at the beginning of their careers [9] [7]. Mentoring is not an overnight process; it is a reciprocal relationship that develops over time and involves trust, commitment, and several interactions [10].

In reviewing the literature, women do not engage in mentoring relationships as men do [11] [12]. Edson [13], in a longitudinal study of 142 females aspiring to obtain a position of school principal, found that 42 percent of the participants who had mentoring relationships early in their careers were able to attain the desired position. In contrast, 17 percent of participants who did not have a mentor were able to attain the same position. Researchers have found the lack of mentors has limited women's career advancement and consider it a factor preventing them from achieving upper management positions in education [14] [15]. The scarcity of mentors has also been attributed to the "good old boy network" often defined as "older male executives and male professors who typically prefer protegees who are a junior of themselves" [16].

Social network is defined as the social connections between entities [17] and a concept ingrained in the theory of social capital, one of the theories associated with career advancement. Coleman [18] theorized social capital as the investment in social relations with expectations of positive returns that make things possible that otherwise would not be possible. However, in relation to career success and advancement, there are three main theoretical approaches to understanding social

capital: Weak Tie Theory [19], Structural Hole Theory [20], and Social Resource Theory [21].

According to Granovetter [19], weak ties rather than strong ties were strongly connected to having provided solid bases of information about job openings to the individuals. He argued:

Those to whom we are weakly tied are more likely to move in circles different from our own and will thus have access to information different from that which we receive. p. 1371.

Similarly embedded in how people interact with different contacts, Burt [20] presented structural hole theory which asserts that structural holes exist between contacts who are not connected with each other and are not strongly associated with one another. Structural hole theory is concerned with establishing primary and secondary contacts and expanding the network of information and timely access to job opportunities. In contrast to weak tie theory and structural hole theory, both related to the structure of ties, social resource theory is focused on the characteristics and the resources provided by social connections. This theory emphasizes how an individual can access social connections and the extent of those networks to gain benefits such as a job [21].

As the marketplace has evolved with the inclusion and high accessibility of technology, new mentoring models have emerged. Higgins and Kram [22] introduced a new social network theory linking the concepts of social capital with mentoring called "developmental networks" which are the different social systems and ties that are created from a job, school, community, or professional association]. Furthermore, positive relationships were found by Blickle et al. [23], who examined 112 employees' responses about the influence of mentoring and networking and found mentoring as a predicting factor for career satisfaction but networking as the strongest predictor of career success. Participants also attributed their success to their mentor's organizational power level. This study demonstrated how mentoring relationships were pivotal in fostering social networks that guided and ultimately helped new employees to find career success.

3. Methodology

This study was designed to explore the participants' lived experiences, behaviors, and perspectives. Therefore, a narrative research design was used. Narrative inquiry collects the stories, narratives, or descriptions of people to understand their lived experiences [24]. Narrative research is focused on interpreting the participant's perspective through the lens of a framework; interviews are often used to collect data to analyze the participant's own words, reflections, and life stories [25].

Qualitative data was gathered in the form of semi-structured, open-ended face-to-face interviews. Responses to the interview questions were recorded using an audio tape device after obtaining permission from the participants. Pseudonyms were given to each participant to protect their identity. A total of twenty women took part in the study. The participants were selected using a criterion sample method to ensure the participants met a specific criterion [9]. The sample was limited to public school employees as they all must be certified by the state. To obtain state certification, all applicants had to meet the following qualifications: (a) have a master's degree; (b) a minimum of five years of experience; (c) passed a school leadership exam; and (d) have completed an internship.

A demographic questionnaire was used to establish preliminary information such as parents' background and ethnicity, participants' age, marital status, number of children, years of experience, education level, and Spanish fluency. This data revealed that 14 participants were between the ages of 30 and 45 years, while the other six were between the ages of 46 and 60. Fourteen were second-generation Americans born in the United States to foreign-born parents. The remaining six participants immigrated to the United States between the ages of four and seventeen and therefore were categorized as first-generation. At the time of the interviews, 17 participants had at least one child; 3 were divorced, 13 were married, and 4 were single. Additionally, 16 participants self-identified as having native Spanish-speaking fluency, while four only described themselves as having limited fluency. 11 participants had attained two master's degrees, five were seeking doctorate degrees, and four had attained a doctoral degree.

3.1. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed inductively, and constructive code categories were created. Descriptive codes were used to label the data with descriptive words, and in vivo codes were created using the exact words or phrases used by the participants. Then a second cycle of codes was created to group data according to the following three characteristics: the relationship between the codes, the frequency of the codes, and the meaning of the codes [26].

A cross-case analysis was completed using data summary tables and case-level meta-matrices to connect the interview questions with the salient themes in the second coding cycle. The analysis process was completed by clustering data and using plausibility until enough evidence was collected to draw conclusions to answer the research questions [26].

The fidelity of the contact summary forms, personal memos, and interview transcripts achieved

validity in this narrative research. The study's findings are limited to a small number of Latina school administrators serving as vice principals, principals, supervisors, and directors in public schools. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to individuals other than those involved in the investigation process.

4. Results

The participants' experiences shed light on the ways in which Latina women became interested in the field of education. This information is relevant because most school administrators begin their careers as teachers. In addition, the results indicate how they developed mentoring relationships formally and informally as well as the mentors' influence on their interest in school administration. The following themes emerged from the analysis.

4.1. Entrance to Education

Latina school administrators entered the field of education in multiple ways. Eight of the twenty participants knew they wanted to be educators at an early age. Six of the women decided to pursue education careers while in college, after working with children or having children. The other six chose education as a career path after they had earned their bachelor's degree in other disciplines. Women who entered education as a second career had events in their lives that caused them to change their minds. Naty is one example of someone who entered education after graduating college with a degree in another area. She was born in the Dominican Republic but came to the United States when she was thirteen years old. After she completed middle school and high school, she moved back to the Dominican Republic with her parents. While there, she earned her bachelor's degree in Business Management and was working for a transnational company until she immigrated back to the United States with her then-fiancé. She realized she was no longer happy working in business and decided to change careers. Some of her friends who were teachers recommended that she try education. She started as a teacher's assistant at a pre-kindergarten school then became a certified teacher through the alternate route teaching program.

Other participants entered education by coincidence. That was the case for Stephanie who earned a bachelor's degree in Photography and was unable to support herself by working weekends taking pictures at weddings. She asked her friends for help finding a job and one of her friends mentioned that his mother was in charge of substitute teachers in a school. Stephanie recalled her entrance in education: "I got into it by accident, by a fortunate accident. I loved it and I've been doing it now for thirty-four

years altogether." Her first job as a substitute teacher was working with special needs students, which inspired her to complete a teaching program to become a special education teacher. At the time of the interview, she was working as a high school vice-principal in an urban district.

The process of finding a position as a teacher was relatively easy for most of the participants, as nineteen of them found their first employment as a teacher without major challenges. One of the salient themes was that schools were looking for bilingual teachers. Since many of the participants spoke Spanish, they did not encounter difficulty getting hired. Some of them were offered a position without a formal interview. That was the case for Carolina, an elementary school principal who was able to obtain her first job as an elementary school teacher because she spoke Spanish. Carolina recounted, "the principal was just looking for anyone who spoke Spanish. So, I was hired on the spot". Modesta has similar experiences being offered a position immediately after completing her bachelor's degree in education, and she attributed her ease at getting hired to speaking Spanish.

Mentoring relationships were not associated with them finding positions as teachers. However, the most salient theme to finding teaching positions emerged from their social networks. Several participants reported that social ties and relationships were responsible for their job entry. These women were able to access information and eventually obtained teaching positions without obstacles. This is congruent with the theory of social resource, which refers to access to information and career outcomes related to one person's social connections and promotions in the hierarchical structure of an organization [21] [26] [27]. Sonsirie used her weak ties [19] to find a teaching position after she had applied to multiple districts and was not receiving calls for interviews. She contacted her friends and her sorority sister's mother, who worked in a large urban district. The woman had access to information about openings and put in a good word for her with a school principal. Soon after, she was hired Rafaela's experiences were similar. She stated:

I got a job immediately. I just called my old teachers from my old junior high school to say hi, and they said, 'we need you' Our French teacher is retiring, so come right away. I was hired right away.

4.2. Formal Mentoring

As part of the process to become fully certified, newly appointed school administrators in a public school have to complete a mandated two-year mentoring program. During the first year of residency, there is a minimum of forty-five mentoring contact hours required; in the second year, only thirty contact hours are needed. Mentors are randomly assigned by

a state program, and the requirement to become a mentor include having experience as a school administrator as a current or former practitioner. Mentoring contact includes the mentor visiting the mentee's school to conduct observations, peer support meetings with other newly appointed administrators, and participation in professional development opportunities. This mentoring program was paid by the mentee throughout the two years of mentoring.

Many of the women did not find benefit in the formal mentoring program. Only six of the nineteen women who participated in it found the mentoring element beneficial. Trust is the basis to establish strong mentoring relationships which corresponds to the theory of mentoring [4] [5] [7]. The women who trusted their mentors had more overall satisfaction with the program as they were able to talk honestly with their mentors. On the contrary, the lack of trust for their mentors was a detrimental factor to the success of their mentoring relationships. Ivelysse remembered her experience as follows:

> I would never tell him that there were things going or what I was facing as an administrator…I didn't know who he was connected with politically, so I was not going to share with him.

Although Ivelysse was having a challenging relationship with her principal and would have benefited from mentoring guidance on how to handle the situation, she decided not to share her challenges with her mentor because she did not think it was safe to expose her vulnerability to someone she did not trust.

Other complains related to their dissatisfaction with the formal mentoring program included having retired mentors who were no longer experts in school leadership, and having mentors who were just interested in the financial reward. Altagracia expressed her thoughts about her mentor "just coming around to collect a check":

> I have a mentor, I like her, but she's kind of non-existent. You know she is a retired superintendent so I just kind of feel like she is there to collect a check. I get better mentoring from my colleagues and my principal here in the district…She comes here sign papers, collects a check and then she leaves.

4.3. Informal Mentoring

All the participants in this study were able to identify at least one informal mentor in their professional careers. Frequently, the informal mentor was their immediate supervisor, and the mentoring relationships usually began organically by working in collaboration to complete a task. Women had different mentors at different times in their careers, and they played different roles in their professional development and career advancement. For example, Daisy became invested in learning about curriculum, and her passion for curriculum allowed her to establish a connection with her informal mentor, who shared the same passion.

Informal mentoring also developed through supervisory roles. This was the case for Yocasta, who developed an informal mentoring relationship with her school principal and often cooperated with him on different projects: "He totally supported what I was doing…I think he did play a very important role in the way that I work as a principal today."

Mentoring relationships emerged at different times in the participant's professional careers. Julissa, for example, found an influential mentor in her career while completing her internship to become a teacher. They became colleagues, and after he retired, they kept in contact. Julissa remembered him as follows:

> He followed me around with a notebook and wrote down everything I did. He is the reason why I am successful. His teaching style does not work for everyone, but it worked for me.

Not all women had long-lasting mentoring relationships. Two participants indicated their mentoring relationship changed when they shared with their informal mentors their desire to become school administrators. For example, Nelly had two mentors, her principal, and her vice principal. They were both very reassuring and supportive of her work and they made sure she was learning leadership skills by providing her with professional opportunities to improve her teaching practice. Nelly described her relationships with these two mentors in the following way: "both were very encouraging, offered a lot of opportunities to learn things outside the classroom...they were definitely helping me to progress in my career." She became a school counselor in the school district, and, soon after, she informed her principal that she was pursuing school administration. Sharing her intentions of becoming a school administrator caused a shift in the way her principal treated her. Nelly commented on the changes as follows: "things became a little rocky, um kind of fell out of an inner circle …I was kind of pushed back a little bit." Despite her disconnect with the principal, she continued her mentoring relationship with the vice-principal, who keeps in contact with her. However, she moved on and found employment outside the district as an elementary school vice-principal as she realized she was not going to be promoted within the district. She presumed her principal, who held the decision-making power within the organization, would not promoter her to an administrator role.

4.4. Entrance into Administration

Mentors helped their mentees with their professional development and played influential roles in their career advancement. These mentors often recognized the women's leadership talents, encouraged them to return to school, and advised them to obtain administrative certificates. Mentors also invited the mentees to apply for leadership positions within their organizations and often were part of the hiring committee. Carolina's story exemplifies the influence of mentors in the career decision of women. She received informal mentoring from her principal, who noticed her leadership abilities and requested she obtain an administrative certificate. Carolina explains, "this person really saw the leadership abilities in me. I never saw it myself." Carolina, as per the request of her principal, obtained her leadership certification. Although hesitant to become an administrator, she applied for a supervisory position after her principal suggested she did. In Carolina's example, her principal not only encouraged her to get her certification but also was the person who supported her transition into a supervisory role.

Social capital was important in the participants' career advancement, as they were able to attain positions due to the sponsorship of mentors who were influential in their districts. Sixteen participants were promoted from within their organizations. Fourteen of them had the endorsement of their direct supervisor, who encouraged them to seek administrative certificates, provided their mentees with access to information about the open positions, and who sponsored them to be selected as the final candidate. In some instances, the mentors were even part of the interview committee. Vilma, for example, had access to information from her principal, who wanted her to become his assistant principal. They developed their informal mentoring relationship when she was assigned to work as an interim assistant principal while an administrator was out sick. Her principal informed her that a position would be open before it was posted; he encouraged her to apply for it and was also on the hiring committee.

When remembering her experiences, Vilma mentioned, "I was lucky because he supported me, and because he was the school principal, I knew he wanted me." In the same way, Yocasta had a principal who wanted her to be the final candidate for the vice-principal position at his school. Yocasta admitted to being lucky to have the support and sponsorship of the principal as follows: "he basically persuasive me and said, 'apply for the position. I want you to stay here,' so I did." The social capital they developed with someone in a higher position within the organization gave them an advantage over other applicants who did not have the same social capital and ultimately allowed them to obtain administrative positions.

Another example of how mentors influence the career decisions of Latina women is represented in Yocasta's story. She was working one summer when her supervisor told her, "You are really good, you understand a lot, I'll help you, go get your certificate, get your degree, you know, study to be a principal, you will be a great administrator." Years later, her immediate supervisor and informal mentor asked her to get her certificate again. Since she had just completed a master's degree and only needed three classes to obtain the supervisor certificate she took her mentor's advice and completed the additional classes to get her certificate. She recalled having the support of different administrators along the way as follows: "they persuaded me to seek more, to push myself a little bit more and to you know move up the ranks." She believed she could become an administrator and made the decision to apply for a leadership position because of the guidance of informal mentors.

4.5. Mentoring, Age, Gender, and Race

One salient characteristic of mentors was that they were often much older than their mentees and were near retirement. Therefore, they were not competing professionally with their mentees. Instead, they represented a father/mother figure consistent with the literature, which has found mentors much older than their mentees are a mixture of a father/mother figure [8].

Mentors were of different gender, races, and ethnicities than their mentees. A few participants expressed a preference for mentors of the same race and/or gender who served as role models and who gave mentees aspirations to be like them. For Carolina, the race and gender of her mentors were fundamental to her professional growth as she felt having Latina role models in her life inspired her to strive for more and showed her it was possible to be successful. Elly mentioned having mentors from the same race and gender was ideal because they could easily relate. She explained, "the ties are stronger because the struggle is the same." However, Latina women who previously had male or non-Hispanic mentors indicated that they had been able to establish positive cross-gender and cross-cultural mentoring relationships with their informal mentors due to sharing the same values and/or similar educational experiences. Modesta shared the following:

I don't think that the ethnicity or race of the mentor has a direct impact. I think it is more the mentor's aptitude and openness, and belief system about people.

4.6. Mentoring and Future Career Aspirations

When asked about the importance of mentoring, the women unanimously agreed that mentoring was very important for their professional development and career growth. The need for more networking

opportunities was prevalent in their responses. The consensus response was that there were not a lot of opportunities for them to get to know other administrators, particularly other Latina school administrators. Women who had attained the principalship felt they had no mentoring. They had limited access to informal mentors because in most cases, they had developed mentoring relationships with their immediate supervisors. Still, when they became the person in charge of their buildings, they lost the informal mentoring they had in the past when their informal mentors retired or moved to other positions. Another issue was that principals did not consider their superintendents as mentors; they did not work closely with them and seemed too far removed from the daily operations of a school building.

The future career aspirations of the participants varied based on their positions. For example, of the 11 vice-principals interviewed, 10 considered the principalship their next career goal. Stephanie was the only vice-principal who was not interested in seeking the principalship. She was near retirement and looking forward to doing other things. None of the eight school principals were certain they wanted to become superintendent. Women attributed this dynamic to the lack of the mentoring necessary to strive for the superintendency and the reinforcement from others that they could attain the role. There was a change in dynamics after they became administrators because the Latinas were no longer being encouraged to seek their superintendent certificate or to aspire to become superintendents. Only two women had their certificates at the time of the interviews.

Of the eight school principals, none were certain they wanted to become superintendents. Many of these women perceived the superintendency as a political position. Elly's response regarding the superintendency was as follows:

I see all the politics behind it and I'm not a political person, I feel that, um, like I observed instances where I felt that politics drove education instead of the needs of students and teachers and staff so it just turned me off of it…I don't feel that ethically I can be there because ethically I can't allow myself those kinds of decisions. I just don't want to compromise my values and my beliefs for a position.

Working with the board of education and their different personalities was also a drawback for women. They believed they would have to compromise their values to keep their constituents happy. Julissa expressed her concerns about being a superintendent and her reasons for not seeking that position as follows:

the nine board members you have to deal with…their political affiliations, each of their

needs, answering to each of these nine people and keeping a balance between them. That's the part I hate the most. I don't think is in the best interest of the kids.

Another reason for Latina women not wanting the superintendency was related to losing contact with children as they perceived that the superintendency was too removed from the children. Naty acknowledged her lack of interest in the superintendency as follows:

I love being in the classroom. I love being with the kids. I am the happiest when I am with the students or in the classroom, watching them learn and I think it would take me too far.

Similarly, Julissa was not interested in losing the firsthand experience of working with children. She explained:

Central office I don't know if I am interested because I don't want to lose contact with the kids because I think I can make a bigger impact, but I don't want to because I think I would lose the vision of what's going on.

Participants also believed there was no pipeline for Latinas to attain leadership positions such as the superintendency, and they believed they were not being groomed to become superintendents. Sonsirie stated the following:

So again, what's the motivation? I don't know if I am being encouraged? I know I am not being encouraged to be a superintendent. It would have to come from within. It would have to come from me. I know in my environment I am not being motivated or encouraged to be a superintendent.

Awilda's opinion about the lack of Latinas in the superintendency was as follows:

It goes back to racism. I really do believe that. You know I am sure the majority of superintendents are all men. I am sure the numbers will quantify that they probably were men that had very little experience in a classroom. So, nepotism maybe, you know, knowing somebody getting into those positions and very few Latinas know somebody that can get them into those positions because you are competing with White men. The field itself being a superintendent is very competitive for a Latina woman.

Latina women were proud to be school administrators and shared that they were able to help families by serving as role models and inspiring children aspire to leadership positions. Yocasta described her gratification as follows:

I have to say I feel satisfied here. When you see the Hispanic parents that come into the school and you introduce yourself as the principal and they see you like, 'wow,' you know, you are the principal. It's nice to be that role model for a lot of our kids but also for the parents.

Similarly, Maria also shared that she has influenced her mostly minority community, "I think the parents relate to me…I was a young Latina administrator and you know working with students of color and their families I've gotten so many hugs they are just so happy to see you."

5. Discussion

In this study, two theories were explored, the theory of mentoring and the theory of social capital. This research expanded the limited literature about mentoring as an explicit form of social capital, as both theories have been prevalent in the literature independently. However, there are areas in which mentoring and social capital intertwine. For example, both theories discuss the importance of trust, the pivotal role of sponsorship, and the importance of access to information for career advancement.

In this study, both theories merged as mentors exceeded the expectations of their roles by teaching their mentees "the ropes" of their jobs, encouraging mentees to attain higher education and administrator credentials, and serving as a source of capital by providing them with information about job opportunities, visibility, and sponsorship to help mentees gain promotions.

In this study, there were implications resulting from the different sources of capital women experienced when they attained leadership positions. Women had very different experiences when they sought jobs as teachers than when they sought jobs as school administrators. Women attained positions as teachers due to being bilingual and having access to information mainly from secondary sources. This type of social capital was aligned with the theory of weak ties conceptualized by Granovetter [19], which focuses on the strength of social ties among people. This was congruent with the findings in this study, as the participants relied on weak ties to access information about job opportunities when seeking teaching positions.

On the other hand, women facilitated their entrance into administration due to the social connections [21] provided by their informal mentors with whom they had developed trusting relationships. Their mentors had the power to influence decisions and were positioned at high levels within the hierarchy of their organizations. This finding is important as most women who participated in the study were promoted within their organizations, and therefore, the role of mentors and social capital was evident.

6. Conclusions

This study showed that mentoring relationships played an important role in the career advancement of Latina school administrators. The literature about Latina women has shown that Latina women have found mentors primarily outside of professional environments and particularly in their mothers and/or other close family members [28]. However, all women in this research study stated they had professional mentoring relationships. Participants found mentoring relationships with informal mentors with whom they connected over time through trust and mutual collaboration. This finding suggests Latina women can create and maintain professional mentoring relationships relevant to their career advancement. For most participants, these relationships continued until their mentor retired and eventually ended or became long-lasting friendships. Mentors were highly influential in developing Latinas' interest in applying for and ultimately obtaining leadership positions.

Since the pipeline to school administration comes from teaching, to increase the number of Latina teachers, school districts should provide professional development to their school administrators about the importance of mentoring and how their leadership roles provide an ideal context for encouraging and facilitating the professional growth of their staff. Professional organizations and institutions of higher education can encourage, develop and foster informal mentoring for aspiring Latina administrators not only for induction but for professional growth throughout their careers.

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