

## **Shattering the Glass Ceiling: Portraits and Voices of Latina Executives on the Role of Trust**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The study explored the perceptions of Latina females in executive leadership cabinets and how building trust or mistrust potentially hinders female ascension into top superintendent leadership roles. The insights and perspectives of female executive cabinet members in this study informs future scholars interested in the interconnectivity of leadership and trust, gender, and the antecedents of trust. The superintendent's executive cabinet included participants such as assistant/deputy superintendents, chief operating officers, and executive-level directors.

Keywords: Latina superintendents, portraiture, photo elicitation

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## INTRODUCTION

Equitable access to superintendent positions for women, especially women of color, must improve. Rodriguez (2019) argues that literature regarding Latina superintendents is scarce; thus, the dialogue must continue so that the disparities, patterns, and barriers that Latina women face are brought to light. Further, Rodriguez claims that trust, social capital, mentorship, and networking are integral to Latina superintendents' success; they lend way to better coping skills dealing with cultural incongruence and school board politics. Grogan (1999) posits that drawing upon women's lived experiences, must drive new leadership strengthened by social justice and trust to break the current leadership barriers dealing with race, class, and gender inequities.

School leadership in crisis has taken on a new meaning with the onset of COVID-19, and new leadership has emerged, and this type of leadership has no standards, preparation, or structures (Harris & Jones, 2020). Therefore, now more than ever, trust is the key ingredient in well-operated schools since it is tied to a collaborative school culture where everyone works toward the same mission (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1999).

Given the pervasive context of varied crises impacting schools such as the intense national political context around racial discrimination, equity, and social justice, as well as naturally occurring crises such as weather-related disasters, notwithstanding the current COVID-19 pandemic, trust has emerged as a critical leadership skill. For the purpose of this study, *trust* was defined as a "psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based on positive experiences of the intentions or behaviors of another" (Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 395). Effective school leadership is being framed by trust, collaboration, creativity, connectedness, and responsiveness (Harris & Jones, 2020). One of the central tenets of leadership behavior is trust, and leaders are responsible for setting the expectation to ensure success with and among members of the organization (Adams, 2020; Thompson, 2018; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). People in an organization who do not trust their leader will have a negative impact on performance as well as affect the confidence followers have in the leader (Thompson, 2018). According to Northouse (2019), the principles of trust include predictability, and reliability, even during crises or uncertainty; consequently, leaders build trust by being consistent with their actions.

This study examined the dyadic relationship of trust between superintendents and their Latina executive cabinet teams as vital to the success of the school district. The perceptions gleaned from these Latina cabinet members' interview data were themed and analyzed at the intersection of various extant trust theories and the research literature on females and the superintendency.

## PERSPECTIVE

As a Latina educational professional, the researcher has witnessed and heard stories of many talented executive women who have left the profession due to mistrust in both the educational system and the people who "lead" them. Without trust, relationships are broken, and mistrust permeates every interaction (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). In light of the researcher's insider knowledge (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007), this study examined the trust relationship between Latina leaders in the executive cabinet and the superintendent, specifically the examination of female perceptions of the superintendent's behavior, how superintendents build and elicit trust or mistrust with their leadership teams, and how building trust or mistrust potentially hinders female ascension into top superintendent leadership roles.

## METHODOLOGY

Portraiture methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005), as well as photo-elicitation (Collier, 1957) to evoke conversation, known as a *plática* during the interview process, was utilized and allowed for the examination of the social relationship between the superintendent and the executive cabinet through exploring perceptions of trust-building via interviews with Latina female members of executive teams. Portraiture is rooted in the methodology of qualitative inquiry known as phenomenology; however, portraiture is distinct in that it intentionally includes diverse audiences through a fusion of art and science, while encapsulating the connection between sensory experiences and aesthetic values, bringing to light the beautiful portraits that convey rich and captivating stories (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection.

The study explored the perceptions of Latina females in executive leadership cabinets and how building trust or mistrust potentially hinders female ascension into top superintendent leadership roles. The insights and perspective of female executive cabinet members in this study will inform future scholars interested in the interconnectivity of leadership, trust, gender, and the antecedents of trust. The superintendent's executive cabinet included assistant superintendents and executive-level directors. Participants were selected from school districts of varying sizes in the South Texas region. Map of South Texas with Cities and Counties (2020) identifies South Texas as regions south of San Antonio, Texas, including San Antonio. Therefore, four Latina executive cabinet members from school districts south of San Antonio, including San Antonio, were selected to participate in this study.

For this study, the interviews were approached through a Latina feminist approach which allowed for authentic conversations, known as *pláticas*, to celebrate and support the Latina population, extend both the researcher and the participants' epistemology, and build trusting relationships as a process for change (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016; Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013). The perceptions gleaned from these Latina female cabinet members' interview data were themed relative to various extant trust theories as well as more recent studies examining which characteristics are common among the participants, while also being contextualized in the research literature on females and the superintendency. Lincoln and Guba (1995) argued that the naturalist researcher must establish trustworthiness in their study by adhering to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The four criteria established by Lincoln & Guba to establish trustworthiness were used in the study. Credibility was established through peer debriefing, member checks, and triangulation. Transferability allowed for research findings to be applicable in other contexts. Lincoln and Guba (1985) theorized that in naturalistic inquiry, the responsibility of demonstrating transferability is the charge of the person who applies it in that context. Transferability was established through the use of providing thick description. In the study, confirmability was established through the use of reflexive journals and analytic memoing; the researcher, as the primary investigator, was conscious of her own experience as a previous Latina executive director who sat on a superintendent's cabinet (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Further, the use of an audit trail allows for all records to be inspected upon request.

## Results and Discussion

*That's a commitment that we've made to each other . . . and you know, just creating a different type of culture within our leadership. So, holding that key to me is very, very sacred . . . You need to make sure that you don't lose that trust, or they will take that key away from you and shut down, and you're not going to be able to make that difference. And as a Latina, I mean, like I said, these keys don't come easy. You have to work for them!*

*Bella, participant*

## Participants

Three participants in the study have a doctorate degree in education, and one is currently a doctoral candidate in educational leadership. Three participants sit on the executive cabinet and hold titles such as assistant superintendent or executive director, and one is a newly appointed superintendent, who was previously an assistant superintendent. As far as their ethnic description, all participants in the study identify as Latina. Table 1 outlines the participants, position, degree, and years of experience in education. To protect the identity of the participants in the study, all of the participant names are fictitious, and pseudonyms are used.

**Table 1. Participant Demographic and Academic Information**

Participants	Position	Degree	Years of Experience in Education
Dr. Zoila Esperanza	Executive Director	Doctor of Education	30+
Dr. Bria Solár	Superintendent	Doctor of Education	30+
Ms. Bella Estrella	Executive Director	Doctoral Candidate	20+
Dr. Kara Valiente	Assistant Superintendent	Doctor of Education	35+

## Voices and Individual Portraits

The portraits outlined in this study emerged from several hours of one-on-one interaction with four Latina women in executive positions, allowing for rapport and relationship-building to occur. These conversations, known as pláticas, not only served as a means for data collection,

but also as a methodology built on an epistemological framework, gaining knowledge and linking the researcher via a genuine relationship to the participant, while connecting back to the original research inquiry (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). The pláticas varied from one-hour-long sessions to a little over an hour and a half, and consisted of two separate interviews. Although most of the pláticas during both interview sessions occurred during the allotted time slot, in some cases, the researcher and the participants continued their pláticas via cell phone conversations, text messages, instant messaging, or emails. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the individual pláticas were held virtually via Cisco Webex and were audio-recorded.

### *Dr. Zoila Esperanza*

Dr. Esperanza's big blue eyes and long curled caramel-colored hair complements her fairer skin complexion. In her early 60's, Dr. Esperanza radiated youthfulness and vitality. Her aura of self-confidence is portrayed and evident in her body language; the way she carries herself and her demeanor evoke an outward impression that conveys wisdom, gracefulness, and strength. Dr. Esperanza was quick to proclaim that she was proud to identify as a Latina. As a woman of color, Dr. Esperanza admits that the bar of leadership is set higher. She attests that no matter how tough a decision is to make, communication and transparency are key. "Before I make decisions, I go back and I research it; I have data to prove it! To prove myself. So, I am not just talking, you know, I am not just blowing a bunch of hot air!" Further, she notes that people will judge the decisions you make and may not always like them, but she confirms that as a Latina, it is important to always remain composed, confident, and professional.

Dr. Esperanza had the aspiration of going to college right out of high school; however, before her graduation day, she discovered that she was pregnant. She was a stay-at-home mom for about 12 years before embarking on her educational journey. After completing her doctorate, Dr. Esperanza worked at a prestigious university as an educational specialist, assisting struggling school districts by coaching teachers to assist diverse learners. She has also served as a dean of instruction and has had various executive director positions. Dr. Esperanza has been recognized by her alma mater for her outstanding professional achievements and contributions, especially her commitment to encouraging and inspiring students to pursue a college education. Currently, she works as an executive director at Sombra ISD, a suburban school district with a student enrollment of approximately 5,000. Her passion for education is evident. When asked if her experience as a Latina executive cabinet member prepared her for the role of superintendent, Dr. Esperanza explained:

Well, I'm not applying for anything right now. Uh, but I did at one point when I was first getting my doctorate, and after I did, you know I had considered it; that's where I wanted to go, eventually, you know, being a superintendent. But I would say that women, and especially Latina women, would have a harder time because board members tend to be more trusting of men. I've been around long enough to see that you don't see very many female superintendents, and the female superintendents that you do see are in little bitty districts . . . I think because in little districts, you probably see more of a family, where the matriarch- the mother runs the family.

In her current position, Dr. Esperanza has lost trust in her leader, and the actions by the superintendent have interrupted the trust environment in the executive cabinet. Although the superintendent in Dr. Esperanza's school district is not new, he has recently made changes to the organizational chart. Dr. Esperanza's title was changed, and some of her duties were given to a

newly hired executive. The new executive was selected and brought into the district by the superintendent; that person is from outside the community, and the position was created for them. “That’s the way I feel, he took a couple of my responsibilities away. He moved me to a different department and now you know, I feel like I’ve been overlooked!”

### ***Dr. Bria Solár***

Dr. Solár is an extremely intelligent and confident Latina. In her mid 50’s, Dr. Solár looks younger than her age. Her glowing complexion complements her luminous smile. Dressed in a black suit, she looked polished and professional. She speaks in an eloquent, yet strong voice that commands attention. Her direct and assertive personality is evident as the plática unfolds. During our first plática, she declared, “I get to the bottom line and I’m not as fluffy as maybe others might be.” Her piercing dark brown eyes captivate and pull you into the conversation through her powerful gaze. Even though Dr. Solár is a petite woman, her robust personality signals that she has the ability to tackle challenging situations and overcome adversities. She believes in the power of a team, noting that her leadership style encapsulates the principles of teamwork, inspiring them to work toward a common mission. She has a strong faith in God and believes in the power of prayer. During the photo-elicitation plática, she shared a beautiful photograph depicting her strong faith and spirituality. The photograph depicts a small, yet very powerful container of blessed holy water. The container showcases the image of Our Lady of San Juan de los Lagos (Virgin Mary), a powerful symbol of her Latino heritage and faith. She noted, “I will always have a bottle of holy water at my disposal. I trust that anytime that I’m worried about something, I always sprinkle holy water.” She is not one to surrender when things get tough. As a first-year superintendent, her no-nonsense approach is evident when she says:

And so, you know, sometimes when I’m in a hurry or sometimes when I need to get some things accomplished. You know, I’m just going to say this is how it needs to get done, and that’s it because we don’t have the time to do anything else. There are some decisions that have to get done quickly, and they have to get done correctly. And so, I’m going to expect a certain standard also. But I’m going to live by that standard as well. So, in a nutshell, you know that’s kind of; I guess what I’m talking about is that you know I’d like to work with the team, but I have high standards for my team because I have high standards for myself.

### ***Ms. Bella Estrella***

The first thing that drew the researcher into the plática when first meeting Bella was her eyes. Her intoxicating and stunning green eyes stand out against her perfectly shaped dark eyebrows that frame her lovely face. Bella is a petite Latina with shoulder-length straight blonde hair, a confident smile, and a radiant warm-hued complexion. She exudes an aura of external self-confidence coupled with vigor and energy. During our first plática, Bella was well dressed; she wore a stunning vintage-inspired floral print blouse that featured a high neck. The oversized mahogany-colored built-in shelves behind her desk housed various awards, certificates, art pieces, and family photos. Her office felt warm and inviting. The use of wood tones, lots of greenery, and golden earth tones made everything in her office look cohesive and elegant.

Bella, the youngest of four participants, has a little over 20 years of experience in education and currently holds the title of Executive Director for a large urban school district.

With a big bright beaming smile, she proudly announces that she is an alumna of the school district she serves. She has held various positions in education that include teacher, counselor, assistant principal, and principal. Having been the first woman principal of the largest high school in her district, Bella is honored that the campus she led has been nationally recognized for the success of their early college initiatives. She attributes her success to the relationships and the collaboration that she has developed with the teams she has led. As a Latina leader, Bella believes in believing in yourself and celebrating success for herself and others:

You can't let anybody dictate your future, and you can't let anybody tell you what your limits are and where you should go! And I think for too long that has happened to a lot of us, right? You strive to stay driven and focused, and you do what you're really passionate about, and you're going to get to that point in life where you're going to see that success in yourself and others. You know? You're really going to be able to make an impact on the lives of others, and I really think that as leaders, at least for myself, when I see others succeed, that just brings joy to my heart because I feel like perhaps that I made a slight difference in helping them reach that success. And even if I didn't, I mean, I'm really that type of individual that likes to celebrate others.

### ***Dr. Kara Valiente***

Dr. Valiente is a petite Latina with shoulder-length wavy dark brown hair and striking brown eyes. She is soft-spoken; however, she exudes a strong sense of confidence, and it radiates outward as she begins her story. During our first plática, she wore a beautifully tailored soft blue blouse. In her early 60's, she has a youthful appearance and vibrant personality. The golden glow on her skin indicates that she enjoys outdoor activities. Her big beautiful smile is infectious and welcoming. Although I had not met Dr. Valiente before, I quickly felt relaxed and at ease. As we begin our plática, it was organic, open, honest, and it flowed nicely. We both had a genuine interest in the information we were sharing with each other. It was evident that Dr. Valiente was passionate about the children and the families she served.

It's, you know; it's a commitment! Because I live in this town, you know, it's not just a place I go to, and I do my job, and I clock out. It's a place I work and live, and the children, the students that we serve they feel like my family or extended family. So, there's a greater ownership and commitment to that.

Dr. Valiente has been in education for over 35 years. Although her degree was not originally in education, she quickly realized that she wanted to teach and make a difference in the lives of children. So, she went back to school to get a degree in education. Soon after her children were grown, she pursued her doctorate in educational leadership. Her faith and family have been her greatest support system.

As a first-generation college graduate, she felt that she needed to make a difference in the lives of children and be a role model to them. Due to the economic disparities and challenges, she faced as a child, her family often migrated and left their home in search of work and better opportunities. Therefore, as a child of poverty, she understood the struggles of the children she was serving. She believed that authentic and transparent relationships needed to be developed with the children and their families. She expressively professes:

So, it was really important to me that my teachers and all of us treated everyone that was coming in the door with respect, dignity, and honor them in the language that they needed to be addressed, and the same thing for the children. When I think of myself as a

leader, it was really important to me that I model, uhm, behavior you know from the perspective of my parents, you know of myself, of my upbringing as a migrant child. I know how important education is, and that's why it is really important to me that I somehow allow this opportunity for others because I know that I can help improve the quality of life for people. So, my upbringing has had a significant impact.

## Themes

The data uncovered five emerging themes that included unreliability (as an obstacle to trust), as well as key components for building trust including: teamwork, concern for others, developing relationships, and transparency. As discovered in the data, the subtheme of respect was also a dominant term that cut across three out of the five themes. The subtheme active listening was represented in two out of the five themes. Also, integrity, honesty, and ethical behavior, which are similar in meaning, were represented across three different themes. Individual data revealed that three out of the four participants had become disillusioned having endured negative experiences, including betrayal and ultimately a lack of trust with their current superintendent. Mistrust as a barrier to breaking the glass ceiling deterred three out of the four Latinas from ascending toward the superintendent position. Three participants concurred that due to their current superintendent's behavior and actions, they decided to postpone applying for a position as a superintendent. Of the three who noted that they are not aspiring to ascend to a superintendent position, one disclosed that her decision could change if an opportunity came her way, the other shared that she has thought about the possibility of retiring soon. Yet, another noted that she had been approached to apply for a superintendent position; however, she is currently not interested based on her recent experience with distrust.

Overall, the findings of the study determined that deficiencies in the relationships between the Latina executive cabinet members and the superintendent exist. More time was needed to cultivate trust in those relationships. All participants agreed that trust is difficult to earn, and once it is lost is difficult to restore; however, all participants highlighted that having a strong support system that encourages building relationships, transparency, concern for others, and teamwork are important facets of building and can facilitate the rebuilding of trust.

Three out of the four participants agreed that they have been subject to sexist or racist inequalities and hostilities from the superintendent and members of the executive cabinet. Another dominant thread across conversations included participants speaking passionately about the judgmental and stereotypical discrimination they faced on the job based on their ethnicity and gender. One participant recently ascended into the superintendent position; however, three out of the four participants attribute a lack of trust as a significant factor in their decision to postpone advancing their careers.

All participants agreed that gender did not play a factor in their decision to apply or consider applying for the superintendency position. However, most noted that since they have been confronted with negative people who question their ability or qualifications in their work setting due to their race and gender, they have a responsibility to themselves to prove their cynics wrong. Three participants shared that when they face adversity due to stereotyping, they have a passion for working harder. Three participants mentioned that it is more difficult to ascend into the superintendent position as female since it is a male-dominated field. All participants mentioned that as Latina executives, they have to work harder to prove themselves, especially if seeking to aspire to a superintendent role. Further, all participants expressed a strong desire to

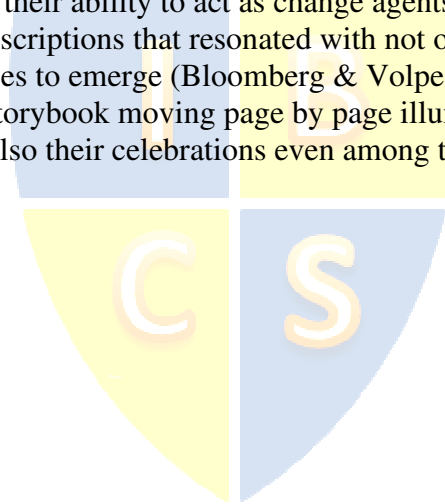


support and encourage other Latina women to succeed, most noting that a strong support system must incorporate Latina mentors to support the Latina in ascending into high-ranking leadership positions.

All participants agreed that crises' contexts impact trust-building relationships between the superintendent and their cabinet. Teamwork, concern for others, developing relationships, and transparency were the common themes that resonated with eliciting a collaborative culture during crisis situations. Likewise, all participants established that the COVID-19 pandemic and other school crises, coupled with mistrust in the superintendent, have illuminated the importance of leadership behaviors that elicit trust-building relationships that empower all members to be part of a productive team regardless of gender or sex. All participants expressed that the superintendent has a commitment to navigate a team during a crisis successfully, and trust should be at the center of the superintendent's agenda.

## CONCLUSION

The study's findings illuminated the diversity, varied experiences, and responses of these Latina professionals and the complete lack of trust or mistrust with the superintendent, as well as their thoughts about hope and their ability to act as change agents as evidenced in the pláticas. They produced vivid, thick descriptions that resonated with not only the researcher, but also allowed their compelling stories to emerge (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Through the pláticas, their stories unfolded, like a storybook moving page by page illuminating not only the participants' adversities, but also their celebrations even among those challenges.



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