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ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, *AQUÍ ESTAMOS: A PORTRAIT OF FOUR LATINX SCHOOL LEADERS IN GEORGIA*, by TAYLOR BARTON, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Philosophy, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

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AQUÍ ESTAMOS: A PORTRAIT OF FOUR LATINX SCHOOL LEADERS IN GEORGIA

by

TAYLOR BARTON

Under the Direction of Sheryl Cowart Moss, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Latinx school leaders in Georgia experience inequitable representation. Currently, less than one percent of administrators in the state are Latinx, while 16 percent of students identify as Latinx. (“Downloadable Data | The Governor's Office of Student Achievement,” n.d.). To date, exhaustive database searches have not provided evidence of existing research examining Latinx school leaders in Georgia, and this study adds to the greater body of literature by bringing to light the stories of four Latinx individuals who serve in leadership capacities in the state. This in depth, qualitative Portraiture study explores the lived experiences of these four Latinx school leaders, addressing the question, “What are the lived experiences of four Latinx school leaders in Georgia?” Utilizing a phenomenological approach (van Manen, 1997), the personal and professional experiences of the Latinx school leaders were explored through semi-structured interviews, observations, document analysis, and reflections on the poem *América* by Richard Blanco (1998). The data were then examined according to Eisner's theory of Connoisseurship (2002) and Tracy’s “Big-Tent” Criteria (2010). Results were presented through the lens of Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 2002). Major findings of this study revealed the

following emergent themes in the experiences of all four Latinx school leaders: (a) support of family (b) assimilation (c) experiences of prejudice and racism (d) giving back to the community and (e) ESOL and foundational literacy. This in-depth composite portrait creates new understandings about the lived experiences of Latinx school leaders currently working in the state of Georgia.

INDEX WORDS: LATINX, PORTRAITURE, GEORGIA, SCHOOL LEADERS, INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP, HISPANIC

AQUÍ ESTAMOS: A PORTRAIT OF FOUR LATINX SCHOOL LEADERS IN GEORGIA

by

TAYLOR BARTON

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in

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in

the College of Education and Human Development

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DEDICATION

To Cristina, whose love, support, and patience created the space for these stories to be told.

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1. AQUÍ ESTAMOS: A PORTRAIT OF FOUR LATINX SCHOOL LEADERS IN GEORGIA

Introduction

In his seminal work, *Art as Experience* (1934), John Dewey describes the nature of art as not solely the finished product, but the systems, struggles, and experiences that come together to create the finished piece. Moreover, a flower is not just a flower, Dewey (1934) contends, but the result of a series of complex chemical and physical changes that bring the flowers natural beauty forward for the world to appreciate. To further illustrate the point, Dewey (1934) contends a mountain is not solely a picturesque being emanating from the earth, but the mountain is comprised of the earth itself. Art is more than a finished product, standing in isolation in a museum. It is the culmination of efforts and experiences that creates art.

Our schools are full of art. More than the displays in glass encasements or stapled to bulletin boards, the people who fill schools present portraits of complex experiences, emotions, and stories waiting to be told. Dewey (1934), Lawrence Lightfoot (1997), and Eisner (2002) contend that the aesthetics of lived experiences of the individuals themselves are just as much art as any photograph, watercolor, or pastel sketch. It is the role of the researcher to bring forth the beauty within these individuals just as an artist recreates the beauty in nature. The beauty is there, hiding in plain sight.

Art that portrays things unseen or unexplored can be captivating to an audience - a rare interaction in nature or a portrait of an individual at their most vulnerable. The unseen becomes visible, and the beauty becomes manifest in elucidation. In his book, *The Thinking Eye* (1961), the artist Paul Klee states, “Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible” (p. 76).

In the process of appreciation, attention must be paid to composition and formation, not just the thing itself (Eisner, 2002). In this way, the personal and professional experiences of Latinx school leaders in Georgia's schools, a group that comprises a small portion of the overall public school leader population, are the subjects of the four portraits of this study. With this in mind, my research question is:

“What are the lived experiences of four Latinx school leaders in Georgia?”

Through a phenomenological study based on van Manen (1997), the lived experiences of four Latinx school leaders in Georgia are portrayed. Given that Latinx school leaders make up less than one percent of school administrators in Georgia, the experiences of four members of this small group of school leaders lend unique insights to the distinct challenges and successes of Latinx school leaders in Georgia (“Downloadable Data | The Governor’s Office of Student Achievement,” n.d.). The positions included under the title “administrator” include the positions listed in Table 1 (*Downloadable Data*, n.d.) . Therefore, of the less than one percent of administrators in Georgia are categorized as “Hispanic,” or Latinx, a fraction of that one percent are school and system-based leaders, or “administrative supervisory personnel” (*Data Dashboards*, n.d.).

In the words of Hernandez and Murakami (2016), “[t]here is still much to be learned about Latina/o leaders’ growth in the K-12 administrative ranks, including their histories, contributions, and experiences...” (p. 2), and these portraits add to the extant body of research by telling the stories of these four individuals. To date, there is a dearth of research on the lived experiences of Latinx school administrators specifically in Georgia. The search terms “Latino administrators in Georgia”, “Latinx administrators in Georgia”, “Latino/a administrators in Georgia”, “Chicano administrators in Georgia” and “Hispanic administrators in Georgia” from

the last five years have not yielded any relevant search results. Additionally, neither “Latinx principals in Georgia”, “Chicano principals in Georgia”, “Hispanic principals in Georgia”, “Latino school leaders in Georgia”, “Chicano school leaders in Georgia”, “Hispanic school leaders in Georgia” did not return relevant results. I included both “Hispanic”, “Chicano”, “Latin@” and “LatinX” in searches, as these distinctions resulted in more literature that could be considered relevant to my research. Thus, an examination of the lived experiences of Latinx leaders in Georgia will add a new, unique perspective to the overall body of research about Latinx leaders and school leaders in Georgia.

The four participants are:

Rafael – Assistant Principal of an Elementary School of Mexican Heritage

Maria – State School Improvement Specialist and ESOL Coordinator of Honduran Heritage

Eugenia – Principal of an Elementary School of Puerto Rican and Venezuelan Heritage

Valentina – County Literacy Program Support Specialist of Dominican and Ecuadorian Heritage

What’s in a name?

The Latinx community is a vibrant, varied population, with a myriad of communities, culture, and customs (Romero, et al., 1997). The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines Latinx as “of, relating to, or marked by Latin American heritage —used as a gender-neutral alternative to *Latino* or *Latina*” (*Definition of LATINX*, n.d.). The term has risen in popularity in the last decade, because of its gender neutrality and inclusivity (*What “Latinx” Means—And Why the Label Is Taking Off | Time*, n.d.). While a multitude of labels are given to people of Latin heritage, for the sake of consistency, the term Latinx will be employed in this study.

In demographic data, individuals identifying as Latinx are lumped together with the term “Hispanic” that does not allow for the distinct cultures that exist in the Latin world. Often, the non-Latinx world assumes that all persons identifying as Latinx or “Hispanic” are of the same race and culture (Ferdman & Gallegos, 2001; Rodriguez et al., 2017; Romero et al., 2014). However, in the Latinx world, a variety of races exists, and racial identity can be fluid and adaptable depending on a person’s context (F. Hernandez & Murakami, 2016; Hitlin et al., 2007). As one’s environment changes, the lens through which he or she sees racial identity changes as well (Gallegos & Ferdman, 2007).

While the terms “Hispanic,” “Latinx,” “Latino,” and other terms such as “Chicano” may be used interchangeably at times, there are important distinctions between the nomenclature (Fergus, 2016; Hitlin et al., 2007). According to Romero, et al. (2014), people of Latin descent are best described as a racial-ethnic group with heritage from Latin American countries. Both race and ethnicity are incorporated into identity (Fergus, 2016). The label “Hispanic,” however, is considered only a racial classification and denotes subjugation to Spanish colonial rule (Hitlin et al., 2007). For example, a person of Spanish ancestry may have a traditionally Hispanic last name, but not hold common heritage with people of Latin American descent.

Demographic measurement tools in the United States, such as the Census, generally utilize the term “Hispanic” (Fergus, 2016; Hitlin et al., 2007). In fact, the term “Hispanic” was initially used by the U.S. Census Bureau starting in 1970 in order to identify the various peoples from Latin America into one group (Hitlin et al., 2007; Portes & MacLeod, 1996). Since then, some measures have accounted for the myriad of racial identities that exist within the Latin community. For example, a 1987-1988 demographic survey administered by the NSEC only contained the following four race categories: 1) American Indian, Aleut, Eskimo, 2) Asian or

Pacific Islander, 3) Black, and 4) White. A person's "Latino" origin was asked in a separate item. In more recent NCES surveys, however, the category, "Hispanic, regardless of race" was created under the question of race (Hill, Ottem, DeRoche, 2016). However, in order to consider the variety of races that are encompassed in the term "Hispanic," the NCES created the category "Hispanic, regardless of race" and "White, non-Hispanic" (Hill, n.d.). While measurement tools still employ the term "Hispanic," there has been increasing acknowledgement of the racial differences that exist (Gallegos & Ferdman, 2007). There are other labels ascribed to people of Latin descent. "Chicano" refers to a person specifically of Mexican descent (Romero, et al., 2014). "Latin@" is another gender neutral label emerging as an alternative to Latino/a, especially in social media (Jr & Lozano, 2019).

For the purposes of this literature review, I have settled on the term "Latinx". When discussing demographic measurement tools, however, I will maintain the use of the term "Hispanic" to remain consistent with the labels used in the reporting. While "Latinx" is not completely sufficient to encapsulate the variety of ethnicities, cultural heritages, and gender of the participants, it is widely employed in contemporary research and provides a gender neutral label that honors the culture and tradition of the people employing this nomenclature. However, in the words of Hitlin, et. al (1997), "There is a tension between an analytic understanding of the differences between race and ethnicity and properly conceptualizing the lived experiences of individuals less concerned with such definitional issues" (p. 591). No matter what ethnic or racial umbrella an individual may find him or herself, the sum total of experiences, both personal and professional, give true definition to the individual.

Review of the Literature

United States Latinx Demographics and Statistics

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, there are more people who identify as Latinx living in the United States now than any other time in our country's history (*The Hispanic Population: 2010*, n.d.). According to the Pew Research Center (PRC), the total Latinx population is about 55.3 million, accounting for 17.3 percent of the overall U.S. population (A. Flores, 2017). This is a stark contrast to the year 1980, when Latinx totals were just below fifteen million people in the United States. Additionally, the median age of U.S. born Latinx is 13, while the median age of foreign-born Latinx is 37 (A. Flores, 2017).

The United States is experiencing a new "Hispanic Diaspora" (Hatch et al., 2016). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2011), the majority of the nation's overall population growth between 2000 and 2010 was a result of an increase in the country's Latinx population". Within the Latinx community, 64 percent are from Mexico (A. Flores, 2017). The number of Mexican immigrants entering the U.S. has remained constant - sitting at about 11.7 million per year in both 2010 and 2014, though immigrants from other Latin countries are entering the United States in increasing numbers (Batalova, 2018). In addition, the Latinx population boom in the United States is not solely due to increased immigration, but also increased birth rates within the United States (Stepler & Lopez, 2016). While the majority of Latinx reside in the West at 40.2%, the South is close behind at 36.7 percent (Stepler & Brown, 2014).

By 2050, there will be more school-aged Latinx children in U.S. schools than school-aged non-Hispanic White students (Garcia Bedolla, 2012). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the Latinx student population has increased from 16 to 24 percent between 2000 and 2013 (de Brey et al., 2019). It is projected that the number of Latinx students will increase to 29 percent by 2024 (de Brey et al., 2019). By the year 2030, 72 percent of the

elderly in the United States will be White, while half of America's children will be Latinx (D. J. Hernandez et al., 2009). This rise in the Latinx population is reflected in K-12 schools throughout the United States. In 2011, one in four students in public education was Latinx (Fry & Lopez, 2012). Approximately 25 percent of all Latinx students in the U.S. are first generation, while the other 76 percent are second generation or higher (Reed, 2015). Through their rising numbers alone, Latinx, especially Latinx youth, will have great influence on the future of the United States (Darder, 2016).

A national problem with Latinx disproportionality between Latinx and other races of teachers exists. In 1991, when 11.8 percent of K-12 students were Latinx, only 3.7 percent of the teachers were Latinx (Galindo, 1996). Nationwide, Latinx teachers make up 7 percent of the total teacher workforce, while 83 percent of teachers are White (de Brey et al., 2019).

Even in higher education, the problem exists. In colleges and universities in California, Texas, and Florida, studies revealed a disproportionality between the number of Latinx faculty members in public (including flagship) universities, and the growing Latinx student populations (Perna et al., 2010; Santos & Acevedo-Gil, 2013). These disparities can be attributed to many factors, including an ever-increasing achievement gap in graduation rates on all levels for Latinx students and increased job opportunities in other industries for potential teacher candidates (Boser & Center for American Progress, 2014).

In school leadership, the gap between Latinx student populations and Latinx school leaders is even greater. The number of Latinx school leaders in the United States has not increased at a commensurate rate as the growth of the Latinx student population. An NCES report on principal demographic trends (2016) reveals that the overall percentage of Hispanic principals in public schools in the United States increased from four percent in 1987-1988 to just

seven percent in 2011-2012. The 2017-2018 National Teacher and Principal Survey by the NCES found that the number of Hispanic principals increased to nine percent nationwide (Taie & Goldring, 2019). Of note, Hispanic, or Latinx, principals constitute approximately 25 percent of all urban and suburban principals, and only about three percent in rural schools (Taie & Goldring, 2019).

Statistics of Latinx in Georgia's Schools

According to the Pew Research Center, Georgia's 2014 Latinx population sits at 923,000 people, representing roughly ten percent of the state's total population (2014). According to the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) subgroup report of 2015-6, 15 percent of K-12 students identified as Hispanic, an increase from 12 percent in 2010 ("Downloadable Data | The Governor's Office of Student Achievement," n.d.). Georgia ranks third in the United States for growth in foreign born population, with the Latinx population doubling in the last decade (Tarasawa, 2013).

While the Latinx K-12 student population has risen in recent years, the teacher and administrator workforce has not kept up. In 2011, one percent of teachers in the state of Georgia identified as Hispanic, while in 2016, only two percent of teachers identified as Hispanic. This contrasts with the percentage of White teachers (~74%) and Black teachers (~25%) ("Downloadable Data | The Governor's Office of Student Achievement," n.d.).

An examination of data supplied by Georgia's Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) (2017) revealed some large discrepancies between Latinx teacher and school leader numbers and the percentage of Latinx students in the school system. While the urban school systems of Gwinnett, Fulton, DeKalb, and Cobb had the highest number of Latinx teachers and administrators in relation to the percentage of Latinx students, the more rural counties have large disproportionalities. For example, Echols County students are 45 percent

Latinx, yet the school system does not employ any Latinx teachers nor administrators. Atkinson County students are 37 percent Latinx, yet the county has only three Latinx teachers and no Latinx administrators, equaling less than 1 percent. Finally, Toombes County schools' Latinx student population is 26 percent, yet the county employs less than one percent of Latinx teachers and no Latinx administrators (“Downloadable Data | The Governor’s Office of Student Achievement,” n.d.).

The small number of Latinx administrators in Georgia contrasts with the rising Latinx population in the state (A. Flores, 2017; Tarasawa, 2013). In fact, the disparity between the percentage of Latinx administrators to the percentage of Latinx students in Georgia presents a larger gap than national averages, where approximately seven percent of school principals and twenty five percent of students are identified as Latinx across the country (Snyder, n.d.).

The following table lists positions consider “Administrators according to Georgia’s Governor’s Office of Student Achievement. All the positions listed are included in reporting the number of Latinx school leaders in the state.

Table 1. Positions Considered “Administrators” According to Georgia’s Governor’s Office of Student Achievement

System Superintendent	Administrative Supervisory Personnel	Director of Psychoeducational Program
Even Start Director	Director of Georgia Learning Resources System (GLRS)	Director of Child Serve

Vocational Director	Vocational Supervisor	Youth Apprenticeship Director
Adult Education Director/Coordinator	Athletics Director	

Latinx Student Achievement

In Georgia, consistent with nationwide trends, Latinx students overall have demonstrated lower graduation rates and lower performances on state test scores to their White peers (Snyder, n.d.). As the Latinx student population increases in Georgia annually, it is vital that school leaders are in place to provide more inclusive and equitable educational environments (E. Crawford & Witherspoon Arnold, 2017). School leaders who can identify with Latinx students on the basis of shared culture, background, and educational experiences are more likely to promote engagement by students and their families (Murakami et al., 2018; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2016).

Moreover, Latinx school leaders in Georgia are underrepresented in school, system, and state educational leadership positions. Less than one percent of Georgia’s school leaders are Latinx. (“Downloadable Data | The Governor’s Office of Student Achievement,” n.d.). Research has shown a direct link between the success of underserved populations, such as Latinx, and the representation of Latinx educators in school leadership (Crawford & Fuller, 2017; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2016; Nash & Bangert, 2014; Scanlan & Lopez, 2012). Cultural awareness and capital are important elements to the success of schools (F. Hernandez et al., 2014; Murakami et al., 2016a; Wiemelt & Welton, 2015; Yosso, 2005).

Impact of Latinx School Leaders

Latinx school leaders can be powerful role models, mentors, and advocates for Latinx students. Latinx school leaders can lead for social justice to remove barriers to success for Latinx students through social justice leadership practices (D. DeMatthews, 2018; D. E. DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2019), and can also help prepare Latinx students to become future school leaders themselves (Murakami et al., 2018). According to Murakami et al. (2016) and Murakami et al. (2018), past school experiences have shaped the professional identities and aspirations of current Latinx school leaders. Therefore, current Latinx leaders' leadership practices can create positive school experiences for Latinx students, thus increasing the possibility that Latinx students may enter the educational field in the future.

To continue, Latinx school leaders can play a vital role in improving educational outcomes for Latinx students (E. R. Crawford & Fuller, 2017b; Reyes, 2012). Leadership behaviors consistent with social justice leadership can have positive effects for students (D. E. DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2019). They can improve educational experiences for Latinx students by sharing their stories and fostering communities' resiliency, pride, and advocacy (D. DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2018; Nash & Bangert, 2014; Niño et al., 2017; Reyes, 2012; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2016). They also can understand the Latinx culture and unique struggles that Latinx students face (Fernandez et al., 2015; Murakami et al., 2018; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2016). They add cultural diversity and relevance to the school context, and play a vital role in promoting the inclusion and advocacy of the Latinx community (D. E. DeMatthews, 2018).

DeMatthews and Izquierdo (2019) and DeMatthews (2018) highlight the essential components of social justice leadership. First, personal experiences and commitments allow leaders to recognize injustice when it occurs and search for answers surrounding those injustices.

Next, situational awareness is a necessary component in social justice leadership. This awareness is a heightened sensitivity to oppressive practices on a local school level all the way to government policy making level. Third, the advocacy orientation component of this style of leadership commits to equity and addresses inequity through dialogue, inquiry, and coalition building. Last, social justice leadership contains critical reflection and praxis, which poses problems and seeks to learn and develop in the face of mistakes and unforeseen problems (D. DeMatthews, 2018; D. E. DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2019; Garza, 2008).

A body of research exists of the lived experiences of Latinx school leaders outside of Georgia. DeMatthews, Izquierdo, and Knight (2017), DeMatthews (2018), Fernandez, et al. (2015), and Garza (2008) illustrate the career experiences of Latinx leaders in various school contexts and internal and external drivers and barriers to attainment of leadership positions. In Fernandez et al. (2015) the career path of five Latinx principals in secondary schools in suburban contexts is illustrated. Internal motivation and passion for the communities they serve influenced the leaders' drive to transform schools, but the participants cited a lack of role models and clear career path as internal barriers to achieving leadership positions.

DeMatthews, Izquierdo, and Knight (2017) and DeMatthews (2018) take a social justice approach to Latinx school leadership and describe the lived experiences of school leaders working in underserved, low performing schools. This research highlights how these leaders had to challenge preexisting exclusionary systems and structures to promote equity in their schools. For example, Latinx school leaders have instituted programs that promote equity for Latinx students, such as Spanish-English dual language programs in school systems along the U.S. and Mexican border. Programs such as these promote equity through the intersectionality of social justice leadership, school improvement, and innovation. Students' Latinx linguistic and cultural

heritage is honored through the curriculum and implementation of programs (D. DeMatthews, 2018; D. DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2016). Additionally, DeMatthews (2018) and DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2014) depict the stories of Latinx leaders forced in difficult political battles in which they found themselves at odds with White majority school policy makers. Traditional systems and internal politics made advocating for marginalized groups, such as Latinx students a harrowing feat. Traditional leadership mindsets of positional authority, culture building, and efficiency come at the cost of Latinx students' social and emotional development. Programs are instituted for their academic outcomes, with little to no attention paid to the social and cultural implications on students (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; DeMatthews, 2018).

While much has been written about Latinx school leaders in other parts of the country, primarily the Southwest United States, Latinx school leaders' experiences in the Southeast have not been subject to extensive research (Niño et al., 2017). Understanding the lived experiences of these Latinx school leaders provides insight into how these experiences have led them to school leadership positions, positions in which they can promote inclusion and advocate for Latinx students (Tarasawa, 2013).

Cultural Capital and Competency

While there is no guarantee that an educator of any race will be effective in producing positive outcomes for Latinx students, Yosso (2005) asserts that Latinx educators supply cultural capital and biculturalism to schools, which can, in turn, enhance student learning and sense of cultural identity within a school community. These six types of capital are: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant. Operating from these areas of capital, Yosso (2005) asserts that many bicultural Latinx educators have the ability to connect with families in ways that those of others cannot.

The first form of capital that Yosso (2005) highlights is the aspirational capital that Latinx school leaders can leverage to allow parents and students “to dream of possibilities beyond their present circumstances” (p. 78) by being role models of college graduation and career success. Next is linguistic capital, which adopts the additive belief of language (Block, 2012), that students contain a rich and vibrant linguistic heritage, and English is not a replacement, but an addition to, Spanish. Yosso (2005) explains that familial capital encourages a sense of community well-being and a sense of family amongst Latinx/as – a major issue given the dearth of Latinx teachers and administrators in U.S. Schools (D. DeMatthews et al., 2017). The fourth form of capital is social capital, which are networks of people and resources within the community that a Latinx school leader can leverage for the betterment of students and families. Penultimately, Latinx administrators can provide the navigational capital that families need to understand how the American school system functions and survive in hostile environments (Harklau, 2013; F. Hernandez et al., 2014). Yosso (2005) describes college campuses as one such environment. Finally, Latinx administrators can offer resistant capital to students, which equips students and families to oppose inequities in society and challenge the status quo.

As stated in Franquiz, et al. (2011), Latinx teachers “must be afforded opportunities to examine, deconstruct, and build on their racialized experiences during teacher certification classes and field experiences” (p. 280). While there is a lack of Latinx administrators and teachers, the more specific need is for adequately trained, bicultural Latinx administrators who can identify with the rising generation of bicultural Latinx students (Wiemelt & Welton, 2015; Yosso, 2005).

However, it should be noted that even bicultural administrators can struggle to make cultural connections if they do not know the heritage culture, or the linguistic nuances of their students and their families (Freire & Valdez, 2017; Tarasawa, 2013). An educator may share a Hispanic last name, but cultural competency relationships are a key factor in keeping Latinx students engaged in the education system (Behr et al., 2014; Harklau, 2013).

Ramirez and Gonzalez (2012) highlight the ways in which Latinx educators can promote agency within their school contexts. Their study highlighted the actions and agency of four separate Latinx educators in San Carlos County, California. These educators' impact on their schools fell into three general areas: building community, creating change, and reaching out (P. Ramirez & Gonzalez, 2012). First, life experiences shaped their views of equity in education, and spurred the individuals to have a sense of love for their students, as well as to advocate for their families, and invest in the community. Second, advocacy in the face of negative beliefs of Latinx students was vital in supporting student success (E. Crawford & Witherspoon Arnold, 2017). Through this dialogue, the four participants in the study were able to positively affect Latinx students, specifically through a Spanish-English biliteracy program.

Finally, the Latinx educators understood that the parents of their Latinx students held valuable insight and intelligence, and prepared parents to contribute to the school environment. This form of mentorship allowed for agency and gave families a voice in the school. The presence of Latinx/as in the school faculty provided a support and cultural connection to the families of Latinx students that educators of no other race could provide (P. Ramirez & Gonzalez, 2012). Reyes (2012) illustrates the impact of Latinx educators, stating that “their lived experience is one that their future Latinx students—those living and experiencing schools on the margins— yearn for” (p. 62).

Funds of knowledge, the resources, wisdom, knowledge, and skills unique to a particular culture, can positively influence Latinx school experience (González et al., 2006; Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992). Latinx school leaders can use their own funds of knowledge to exact change in K12 environments to positively affect outcomes for Latinx students (Moll et al., 2013). Pedagogy and curriculum can be reviewed and enhanced through the lens of the funds of knowledge that the Latinx community provides (Velez-Ibanez & Greenberg, 1992).

Freire and Valdez (2017) make the case that Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) is a necessity even for Latinx educators and leaders, due to the variances between Latinx communities. The authors suggest direct training on issues such as social justice and diversity, engagement of families in the education process, collaboration with higher education institutions for resources and support, and the use of authentic, culturally sensitive materials in instruction. All of these strategies aim to engage “language-minoritized students” (p. 67) and enhance the value of culture and community in K-12 classrooms.

However, Colomer (2014) asserts that not every Latinx teacher or administrator shares the cultural capital described by Yosso (2005). Personal worldviews and school context weigh heavily into the connection a Latinx teacher may or may not have with his or her students, which can create class prejudice about student ability (Yosso, 2005). Significant cultural differences can exist between Latinx subcultures (Colomer, 2014; Egalite et al., 2014; Stromquist, 2004). Teachers may share a native language with Latinx students, but not a culture. Therein lies the need for all teachers to receive support in culturally sensitive pedagogy, and to understand culturally relevant ways to educate their bicultural students (Franquiz et al., 2011). The assumption that all Latinx individuals derive from the same culture can result in stereotyping, isolation, and labeling (Bower-Phipps et al., 2013).

Racial Identity

Because of the large degree of variance between people considered “Latinx,” racial identity of Latinx in the United States can be difficult for Latinx and non-Latinx alike. Despite the growth in Latinx communities of all races, Latinx individuals are subject to homogenous categorization (Murakami et al., 2018). This is especially true for Afro-Latinx, who may be assumed to be a part of the African American culture. In fact, Afro-Latinx in the United States do not easily fit into the black/white racial construct of the United States, and experience prejudice because they do not “fit” into either category (Gallegos & Ferdman, 2007). Moreover, according to the Latinx individuals with darker skin are more likely to experience discrimination (Frank et al., 2010).

Ferdman and Gallegos (2001) identified six levels of Latinx racial identity orientation in order to develop a more complex understanding of Latinx diversity through identity patterns. The varied views of Latinx identity range from “Undifferentiated/Denial” in which Latinxs deny their heritage in order to assimilate into White Anglo culture to Latinx-integrated, where Latinx individuals see their Latinx identity as a part of all their social identities (i.e. gender, religion, profession). Each orientation has its own “lens,” or view of Latinx identity, ranging from “closed” or denial, to “wide” or all-encompassing. Note that Ferdman and Gallegos (2001) employ the term “Latino/a” instead of “Latinx.” These levels are illustrated in the following table:

Table 2: Six Levels of Latino/a Racial Identity Orientation (Ferdman and Gallegos, 2001, p. 31)

Orientation	Lens	Identify as/Prefer	Latinxs are seen	Whites are seen	Framing of race
Undifferentiated/ Denial	Closed	People	“Who are Latinos?”	Supposedly color blind (accept dominant norms)	Denial, irrelevant, invisible
White-identified	Tinted	Whites	Negatively	Very positively	White/Black , either/or, one-drop or “mejorar la raza (i.e. improve the race)
Latinos as other	External	Not White	Not central (could be barriers or blockers)	Negatively	White/not White
Sub-group identified	Narrow	Own sub-group	Distinct; could be	Not central (could be	Not clear or central; secondary

			barriers or allies	barriers or blockers)	to nationality, ethnicity, culture
Latino-identified (Racial/Raza)	Broad	Latinos	Distinct; could be barriers or allies	Distinct; could be barriers or allies	Latino/not Latino
Latino-integrated	Wide	Individuals in a group context	Complex	Complex	Dynamic, contextual, socially constructed

Latinx in School Leadership

Crawford and Fuller (2017), found that in Texas, Latinx administrators were less likely to be hired as school principals, despite an increase in Latinx students and teacher population in the state. The percentage of Latinx principals being hired remained consistently and significantly below the percentage of Latinx students in Texas between the years 1990 to 2010. The percentage of Latinx beginning principals remained at 20 percent from 1996 through 2010, while the percentage of Latinx students in Texas increased from 33.1 percent to 48.6 percent (E. R. Crawford & Fuller, 2017; A. Flores, 2017). This gap has existed despite the indirect benefits of having school leaders who identify with underserved minority school communities (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2016; Yosso, 2005).

The lack of Latinx individuals ascending to leadership positions is also supported in Young and Young (2010). 224 superintendents across the country responded to survey questions regarding screening practices and examined the credentials of candidates with Hispanic names versus presumably non-Hispanic names for a middle school principal position. The researchers examined if a bias existed against Latinx candidates in hiring for a middle school principal position. When given the same credentials for Latinx candidates versus non-Latinx candidates, male superintendents believed the non-Latinx candidates were more qualified than the Latinx candidate (Young & Young, 2010). Considering that of the 13,728 superintendents in the United States, only 1,984 are women (AASA / *American Association of School Administrators*, n.d.), this presents a significant challenge for Latinxs aspiring to attain leadership positions.

An examination into attrition within the Latinx teaching community reveals that Latinx administrators and teachers also face stressors at school. One Latinx teacher stated that a cause of stress as a Spanish speaking teacher is to act as a translator (Colomer & Harklau, 2009; Freire & Valdez, 2017; Solomon, 2017). Additionally, many Latinx leaders lead in schools with high poverty rates, which can be draining emotionally, and lead to emotional burnout (F. Hernandez & Murakami, 2016; Méndez-Morse et al., 2015; Solomon, 2017).

Latinx leaders have the distinct ability to enhance educational outcomes for Latinx students (Rodriguez et al., 2017). The underperformance of Latinx students and low graduation rates compared to their White peers has called attention to the need for educational institutions to be more responsive to Latinx student needs (Gandara & Contreras, 2009; Noguera, 2012; Rodriguez et al., 2017). Latinx leaders are needed to create a counternarrative to the systems and curriculum that favor White culture, but, just like Latinx students, these leaders must overcome barriers to enact change. Lopez (2016) and Ramirez and De La Cruz (2016) highlight how

Latinx administrators and teachers must overcome sociological and political challenges to become transformative leaders in the American educational system. Latinx leaders must overcome pre-existing systems and mindsets that discriminate against Latinx students and educators.

Many Latinx students experience schools that employ a deficit mindset towards their language, culture, and heritage (López, 2016). For example, in some instances students from Spanish speaking homes have been discouraged from speaking Spanish in school, and Latinx students find few characters in school libraries who look like them (Block, 2012; D. DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2016). Schools must employ leaders who have the experience and cultural knowledge to provide inclusive environments for Latinx students, families, and teachers alike (López, 2016; P. C. Ramirez & De La Cruz, 2016; Scanlan & Lopez, 2012). Santamaria and Santamaria (2016) refer to this type of leader as a “Culturally Sustaining Leader” (p. 2).

Hernandez et al. (2014) examines the experiences of a Latina leader focused on social justice and found that the principal’s Latinx heritage weighed heavily in her desire to lead for social justice (F. Hernandez et al., 2014). These findings are also evident in Méndez-Morse et al. (2015), which examined the lived experiences of Latina principals. In this research, the authors used survey responses of 132 Latina school leaders to collect data concerning their professional careers and cultural identity. The findings of this research indicate that the administrators’ heritage and professional experiences influenced their leadership styles, and that Latinas are more likely to be school leaders in high poverty elementary schools in urban settings. (Méndez-Morse et al., 2015).

Menchaca et al. (2016) highlights two “Latina Titans” who have risen to leadership positions in institutions of higher education. Through interviews with two Latina school leaders,

the authors examine the supports needed for Latinas to attain success in careers outside the home, the barriers that they face, and the profile of “highly successful Latina” (p. 98). The themes of a strong, supportive mother, fervent faith, humble beginnings, mentorship, determination and intelligence, and challenges versus obstacles emerged. The authors made specific mention of the lack of mentorship for the participants, and how the Latina leaders obtained success despite perceived racism and gender bias (Menchaca et al., 2016).

Garza (2008) provides an autoethnography of a Latinx superintendent in Texas and the challenges of leading for social justice in the face of oppressive hegemony. While this research didn't find emergent themes based on the author's heritage, it did provide an examination of the lived professional experiences of a school leader advocating for social justice. The findings of this research indicated that the superintendent's sense of social justice informed his leadership, and he was willing to advocate for it despite the political consequences (Garza, 2008).

In researching another minority group underrepresented in school leadership, Wiley et al. (2017), examined the lived experiences of six African American superintendents in Texas. This research collected data through interviews with the six individuals, and the authors determined emergent themes related to overcoming obstacles and strong professional networks (Wiley et al., 2017). More specifically, the emergent themes that influenced the superintendents' ability to achieve the superintendency were (a) a desire to impact others throughout the school system, (b) the participants' sources of personal strength, and (c) external support systems. While this does not address Latinx school leaders, the authors examine the lived experiences of another underrepresented demographic in school leadership. Moreover, these findings are consistent with Fernandez, et al. (2015), who found that the family support and mentors were the most

influential contributing factors for Latinx administrators' ability to achieve school leadership positions.

Lack of Mentors

Latinx teachers and administrators can have a positive effect on Latinx students (Hernandez & Murakami, 2016; Méndez-Morse et al., 2015; Niño et al., 2017; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2016; Zirkel, 2002). However, just as students need teacher role models, future administrators need mentors to help lead the way to leadership positions (Avalos & Salgado, 2016; Wiley et al., 2017). Unfortunately, Latinx role models in school leadership positions are few and far between (F. Hernandez & Murakami, 2016; Menchaca et al., 2016). Those who attain leadership positions state that they have achieved success in their career through perseverance and hard work, but are most often “trailblazers” for future generations of Latinx school leaders (Avalos & Salgado, 2016; Menchaca et al., 2016; Méndez-Morse et al., 2015).

Latinx school leaders add a unique dynamic to the school that has a direct positive effect on Latinx/a, as well as all students', achievement (Darder, 2016; F. Hernandez & Murakami, 2016; Niño et al., 2017; Quiócho & Rios, 2000; Reed, 2015). Farkas (2003) ascertained that when schools have a diverse staff, the graduation rates of all students rise. Conversely, without these role models, Latinx student self-efficacy and belief in the ability to succeed in the K-12 school system can drop (Yeh, 2015). Santamaria and Santamaria (2016) discuss how school leaders who have had similar lived experiences often employ social justice leadership in order to meet the needs of underserved students. They often see the potential in students who have been overlooked, and provide opportunities for minority students that wouldn't necessarily arise otherwise (Farkas, 2003; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2016). Despite adding value and providing opportunities for at-risk students, Santamaría and Santamaría (2016) found the following:

these leaders often encounter racism, discrimination, classism and other micro aggressions or oppressions regularly as part of their participation in societies where they are often historically marginalized. In many cases, these leaders have attained degrees in higher education, leadership preparation/credentials and school leadership positions despite a myriad of odds (p. 4).

Role models of the same race provide students with clear proof of educational and career possibilities (Zirkel, 2002). Additionally, Latinx teachers often have higher expectations for student achievement and can develop more in-depth relationships with students (Yosso, 2005). Unfortunately, in Zirkel (2002), the majority of students of color (including Latinx) reported that they did not have a race and gender matched role model. Taking this into account, cultural competency and the ability to connect with students who have similar backgrounds is vital (Egalite et al., 2014).

Additionally, Gandara and Contreras (2009) state that the most effective teachers and administrators of Latinx students are those who understand and empathize with the struggles that Latinx students face. Recommendations for Latinx student success is outlined by Darder (2016): bicultural Latinx teachers and administrators as role models, teaching practices and curriculum that value culture and language, and parent involvement in the school (Flores et al., 2019). With 20.3 percent of Latinx females and 16.8 percent of Latinx males considered disconnected from American society, building relationships and promoting inclusion is vital (Darder, 2016).

Gap in Literature

The gap in the literature exists in exploring the lived experiences of Latinx school administrators specifically in Georgia. Exhaustive database searches have not provided evidence of existing research examining Latinx administrators in Georgia. The majority of the extant

research has taken place in Texas and the Southwest, so an exploration of Latinx leaders' experiences in this part of the country provides a new perspective to the body of literature. Additionally, examinations of the lived experiences of Latinx educators often utilize Critical Race Theory (Hernandez & Murakami, 2016; Méndez-Morse et al., 2015; Wiley et al., 2017) or Social Justice Theory (D. E. DeMatthews, 2018) as theoretical frameworks. To date, I have not encountered research of Latinx school leaders utilizing phenomenology (Van Manen, 1997), Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), Connoisseurship (Eisner, 2002), nor "Big-Tent" Criteria (Tracy, 2010).

Moreover, an examination into Latinx administrators' personal, as well as professional, identities is lacking in the current body of literature. While some research touches upon participants' lives outside of their schools, most research is solely focused on the professional experiences of school leaders. My focus on the personal and professional lives of Latinx administrators in Georgia, and a lack of a preconceived framework captures the essence of the individual lived experiences and the universal themes through a new perspective and lens.

The gap in literature also exists concerning Latinx racial identity orientation in Georgia. This dearth of literature leaves stories of Latinx individuals in Georgia untold. This gap in the literature applies to both education and non-education contexts. For example, an exhaustive database search has not produced any accounts of the Afro-Latinx experience in Georgia.

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2 AQUÍ ESTAMOS: A PORTRAIT OF FOUR LATINX SCHOOL LEADERS IN GEORGIA

Overview of Study

This study explores the lived experiences, both personal and professional, of current Latinx school leaders in Georgia. This research paints four portraits, one of each individual, and emergent themes that arise from their stories through experiences. The participants' personal and professional experiences are presented to paint a picture of who they are as complex and vibrant individuals, and their portraits combine to create a composite portrait of the collective experience of four Latinx school leaders. This study allows for self-reflection from the participants about what it means to be a Latinx school leader specifically in Georgia. Understanding the stories of those who have “beaten the odds” provides insights and a window into the lives of an underrepresented group in Georgia’s school systems.

This study paints a portrait of four individuals. The initial common characteristic between them is their employment as educational leaders in Georgia. However, more commonalities, both professional and personal, are brought to light, and emergent themes discovered. Stories of struggle, courage, perseverance, and integration into their past and present contexts tie together four separate stories into one unified portrait. The emergent themes that arose are crystallized and presented through anecdotes, poetry, literature, and artwork.

Guiding Question

“What are the lived experiences of four Latinx school leaders in Georgia?”

Significance of Study

My study is an overall portrait of four Latinx school leaders, and how their personal and professional experiences provide insight into the essence of their experiences as school leaders in

Georgia. Van Manen (1997) emphasizes how reflection on individual experiences provides insight and inference into the human experience through the lens of human science, and this approach to research will allow for separate, yet unified stories to be unveiled. This is a topic awaiting research, as to date, an extensive database search has not revealed extant literature specifically chronicling the experiences of this group of school leaders in Georgia.

Methodology

My study is a phenomenological inquiry based on van Manen (1997), which analyzes the lived experiences of four Latinx school leaders in Georgia. The goal of phenomenological research is to understand the human experience through the memory and reflections of individuals (van Manen, 1997). This is the aim of this study: to better understand the lived experiences of Latinx school leaders through the recounting of experiences and subsequent reflections of this study's participants.

More specifically, my research design is hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1997). In short, phenomenological hermeneutics seek to explain the aesthetic and understand lived events in a deep philosophic manner. Determining meaning of experience is the cornerstone of this methodology (Iared, de Oliveira, & Payne, 2016). Phenomenology presents the essence and considers the complex meaning of participants' lived experiences. In the words of van Manen (1997), "Aren't the most captivating stories exactly those which help us to understand better what is most common, most taken-for-granted, and what concerns us most ordinarily and directly?" (p.19). While phenomenology will never be able to reveal the entirety of human experience, it brings to light those experiences that may not be readily known, and celebrates the artistry in those experiences (Dewey, 1934).

The purpose of this in-depth study is to paint a picture of the lives of four individuals' experiences, separately and collectively. Who are these people? How have their experiences shaped the people they are today? How have their careers led them to the positions they hold today? What are their passions? Who are the individuals who have inspired them? What successes and barriers have they encountered, both personally and professionally, and what is the meaning that they make from those experiences?

When researching lived experiences, van Manen (2014) explains that phenomenological data collection and analysis take on a distinct nature in comparison to other methodologies. Thematic analysis is the main device for deciphering data and developing meaning. This meaning making is not like other, more quantitative analysis in which predetermined coding or set measures for understanding data are utilized. Instead, the researcher digests the responses, context, artifacts, and a myriad of other sources of information to "see" themes within the research. Research is just as much art as science, in that data analysis is openly subjective and up for interpretation.

van Manen (1997) described themes as "knots in the webs of our experiences" (p. 90). He states that emergent themes contain the following qualities. The first is that themes point to the overall picture of the entirety of shared lived experiences. Next, "theme gives shape to the shapeless" (p. 88). When looking at the totality of experiences, reflections, and other sources of data, what does it all mean? The totality of shared experiences crystallizes into overall meaning through the exploration of theme. Next, theme gets at the heart of what the researcher and researched alike attempt to understand. More than a list of experiences and artifacts, theme is the intransitive undercurrent attributing deeper meaning to experience. Finally, it is important to note that the theme presents a portion of the overall notion but will never completely express the

essence of it. Try as the phenomenologist may, van Manen (1997) states that theme will only present a portion, and never capture the entire essence of a lived experience.

In this study, participants shared their lived experiences, significant artifacts, and reactions to a piece of literature. Additionally, the contexts in which the individuals work and live are used as a backdrop to gain a greater understanding of who they are as people and professionals. After interviews, observation, and other data collection, data were analyzed and emergent themes determined using Eisner's theory of Connoisseurship (2002). Those emergent themes were refined and crystallized (Borkan, 1999; Ellingson, 2014; Tracy, 2010), and finally presented through the lens of Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 2002). Additionally, a piece of art was selected to represent the combined portraits of all of the participants. The approach will be discussed in more depth in the following section.

Method

In conducting this research, I present my findings using the method of Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) combined with the methodology of Phenomenology (van Manen, 2014), the theory of Connoisseurship (Eisner, 2002), and "Big-Tent" Criteria (Tracy, 2010) This combination of methodologies takes an artful, yet rigorous approach to research and methodology to create a product that van Manen (1997) describes as poetic in nature.

Consistent with the goals of Portraiture and Connoisseurship (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Dewey 1934; Eisner, 2002), phenomenology seeks to express the essence of the individual through rigorous, detailed study of the participants and their contexts (van Manen, 2014). Additionally, this methodology seeks to produce knowledge that invites a dialogue with the reader about human experience, and not empirical generalizations.

Connoisseurship

Eisner (2002) introduces the concept of connoisseurship as the “art of appreciation” (p. 187). This form of criticism employs a detail-oriented, exact approach to a subject in which the critic sees something that others may pass over. Only through careful examination and reflection does the critic see the subject, whether a person, piece of art, or a classroom observation, in its entirety. Citing Dewey (1934), Eisner (2002) states that criticism’s key role is to reintroduce the perception of art. Art does not solely exist in a museum, separate from the world, it is all around us (Dewey, 1934). Simply put, the researcher, or critic, proposes a new vantage point or a different way of “seeing” a subject through rigorous observation, with the end goal of becoming a “connoisseur” of the observed subject.

According to Eisner (2002), educational criticism contains four dimensions. First, the critic describes what is observed in clear, judgement free terms. The aim of the first dimension is to evoke the senses of the reader so that he or she can envision the subject and the context in which the subject exists. This is accomplished through rigorous attention to details hidden in plain sight, with suspended judgement about what is or what should be. The second feature is interpretive. The critic seeks to explain what has been described and the connection between the subject and the context and related conditions. In short, the critic seeks to answer the question, “Why?”. Connections between what is and why it is are drawn (Eisner, 2002).

The third dimension, or feature, in educational criticism is evaluative. After answering “What?” and “Why?”, the critic seeks to add judgement towards the merit, influence, and worth of elements in and around the subject. For example, “What do these comments reveal about the person’s experience?” or “Do these artifacts display evidence of cultural heritage?” Eisner (2002) contends that the normative nature of the evaluative dimension is a vital component of criticism.

Finally, the fourth dimension of educational criticism is general observations and conclusions (Eisner, 2002). Emergent themes from the evaluation of the subject are extracted and evaluated. The small details can coalesce around larger themes after looking at the totality of the data. Through these four dimensions, the critic becomes a connoisseur through the evaluation of small details, drawing of conclusions, and discovery of emergent thematic connections. This is connoisseurship: analyzing and evaluating the parts of the whole and considering in great detail the emergent themes of the subject. Through this, the connoisseur sees what may have been previously or commonly overlooked (Eisner, 2002).

“Big-Tent” Criteria

In an effort to present criteria of high-quality qualitative research, Sarah J. Tracy (2010) describes eight universal elements for research (see Table 3). All eight elements are evidenced through the portraiture in order to ensure valid and meaningful research. These eight hallmarks are a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence (Tracy, 2010).

These elements are evidenced in my research in the following manner. First, the exploration into the lived experiences of Latinx school leaders is worthy in that it is a timely topic: Latinx student populations are growing in Georgia, yet the number of Latinx school administrators is not (*Downloadable Data*, n.d.). Lived experiences and barriers to school leadership are also worth exploring to shed light on this phenomenon. Next, Tracy (2010) discusses how time in the field and in data analysis lead to rigor in research. In high quality qualitative research, the researcher much take pains to collect as much relevant data as possible. Sincerity, the next element, demands that the researcher be honest and transparent (Tracy, 2010). Additionally, the researcher must be self-reflexive about his or her impact on the context, which

is accounted for in the Portraiture approach to research (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), where the researcher includes him or herself within the context of the portrait.

Credibility is the element that Tracy (2010) lists after sincerity. Credibility not only alludes to the verisimilitude of the pieces of data, but also how sense is made of them.

Crystallization is presented as an approach to data collection in which the goal is not a singular truth, but to attain a complex understanding of the data (Richardson, 2000). The resonance of this research is based upon aesthetic merit (Tracy, 2010), which speaks to the artistic manner in which the text is written to evoke beauty and art.

Tracy (2010) next lists “Significant Contribution” as the next criteria for quality qualitative research. This research serves as “practically significant” in that it sheds light on a current phenomenon and allows the readers insight into the lived experiences of the participants of the study. The practical significance lies in that the readers will learn the experiences and perspectives of the participants, thus enhancing their world views. Next, “Ethical” criteria speaks to the humane, and secure treatment of the participants and their data. Data were kept secure in a password protected data file, and pseudonyms will be used in order to ensure anonymity. Additionally, relation ethics (Tracy, 2010) recognizes the mutual respect and connection between participant and researcher, which also exists within the research. Finally, “Meaningful Coherence” (Tracy, 2010) indicates that research achieves its intended purpose of answering research questions in a clear and eloquent manner. The literature, data, and discussion all link together plausibly and meaningful to make for a clear picture of the research to the reader.

Table 3. Eight “Big-Tent” Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research (Tracy, 2010, p. 840)

Criteria for quality (end goal)	Various means, practices, and methods through which to achieve
Worthy Topic	The topic of the research is <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevant • Timely • Significant • Interesting
Rich rigor	The study uses sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theoretical constructs • Data and time in the field • Sample(s) • Context(s) • Data collection and analysis process
Sincerity	The study is characterized by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher(s) • Transparency about the methods and challenges
Credibility	The research is marked by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit (non-textual) knowledge, and showing rather than telling • Triangulation or crystallization • Multivocality • Member reflections
Resonance	The research influences, affects, or moves particular readers or a variety of audiences through <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aesthetic, evocative representation • Naturalistic generalizations • Transferable findings
Significant contribution	The research provides a significant contribution <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conceptually/theoretically • Practically • Morally • Methodologically • Heuristically
Ethical	The research considers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procedural ethics (such as human subjects) • Situational and culturally specific ethics • Relational ethics • Exiting ethics (leaving the scene and sharing the research)

Meaningful coherence	The study <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achieves what it purports to be about • Uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals • Meaningfully interconnects literature, research questions/foci, findings, and interpretations with each other
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Portraiture

Portraiture, developed by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 2002), seeks to paint an increasingly detailed picture of the participant through multiple lenses and in a way in which the participant may not see him or herself. This approach requires a time consuming, reflexive approach on the part of the researcher, or Portraitist, and often focuses on underserved groups, such as African American or Latinx individuals (Chapman, 2007).

Portraiture allows for the consideration of the symbolism that emerges from the participants storytelling and their contexts (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). Considering the data as art, I interpreted the data that emerged from my research in ways that allow for symbolic significance, instead of solely low-inference reporting. This adds a colorful dynamic to the extant literature.

This approach is distinctive from other theoretical and conceptual frameworks for multiple reasons. First, the researcher does not enter into research with preconceived notions concerning the themes that emerged from the study. That is not to say that the researcher is not unaware of biases. In fact, the researcher is up front about any preconceived notions that he or she may have, yet it allows room for these biases to be challenged (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describe the role of the researcher, or Portraitist, in the following way:

Portraiture is a method of qualitative research that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human

experience and organizational life. Portraitists seek to record and interpret the perspectives and experiences of the people they are studying, documenting their voices and their visions – their authority, knowledge, and wisdom (p. xv).

Therefore, the voices of the participants in the study are heard clearly, and their experiences are painted by the Portraitist in a way to be appreciated and considered.

Color, clarity, and accessibility of language are essential in the portraiture. Meant to entertain and illustrate more than report, the portraiture combines the rigor of research with the vibrancy of art. The reader of the research can “see” the portrait through the words of the Portraitist. Instead of being written for academics in the research world, a Portraiture seeks to reach outside the walls of academia. The portrait is intended to be accessible, as an insight into a hidden world open for all to see. The language used in the portrait is not meant to exclude, but include, through understandable prose and word pictures (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

The Portraitist must create a coherent, vivid portrait that the reader can access, consider, and critically contemplate. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) states that the intended reaction from the reader, after reading the entirety of the Portraiture, should be, “Yes, of course” (p. 261). The language and description in the portrait is so clear, that the emergent themes and conclusions become obvious to the reader. This is not easily done, however. The portraitist must take all precautions to make a whole from the sundry parts revealed in the research. This is done through a balance of aesthetic and empirical concerns, interpretation, and the influence of the methodology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Additionally, emergent themes must be considered for either inclusion or exclusion, then ordered, and elucidated so the reader can be both informed and entertained. This is the underlying structure and discipline that belies the accessibility of a coherent portrait.

One of the defining characteristics of Portraiture, as well as phenomenology (van Manen, 1997) is its lack of a premeditated framework and reliance on emergent themes (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The themes emerge from the portrait, instead of the researcher imposing a theoretical framework or predetermined coding over the data, like a colored filter is inserted over a lens (Van Manen, 2016). While this does not mean that the researcher is free from bias, for all research has bias (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), it does point to the freedom that the portraitist has in truly observing, listening, and analyzing the data before developing conclusions.

Five Features of Portraiture

According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), the Portraiture contains five features that form the overall portrait. First, context is used to paint the individuals in time and space. The research is not conducted in a sterile laboratory, but in a dynamic and imperfect canvas of the real world. Next, the researcher's voice is heard in the portrait. The perceptions and opinions of the Portraitist are as relevant in making meaning as the voice of the participants. Next, relationships are vital and necessary part of the Portraiture. The inherent power structure between researcher and participant should be broken down as much as possible for the participants to be vulnerable and transparent. Next, emergent themes come into focus within the portrait. What has arisen from the voices, documents, observations, and other data collection tools? Finally, an aesthetic whole is the sum total of all the other elements.

Within the aesthetic whole lies four components: conception, structure, form, and cohesion (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Conception is the overall story arc for the portrait. The structure consists of the features within the text, such as headers and subheadings, that provide the "scaffold for the narrative" (p. 252), on which the portrait rests. The next

component, form, is described by Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) as “the currents that wash across the structure” (p.253). As a poet crafts language to illuminate an image, so does the Portraitist. In Portraiture, the craft of writing adds vitality, complexity, and subtlety to the words on the page. Finally, coherence, the last component of the aesthetic whole, brings the three components of conception, structure, and form into a digestible, logical, and orderly form. Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) are clear that Portraiture is written for an audience extending beyond academic circles, and therefore the writing should appeal to a wide audience and be easy to understand. Beauty is found in simplicity.

Five Elements of Context Within Portraiture

The crux of Portraiture is context. The researcher must observe the persons being studied, or participants, as a part of a whole, an actor in a complex ecosystem; the participant is a focal point within a larger landscape. In fact, Dewey (1934) states that the individual is shaped by the environment just as much as the individual shapes it. Capturing the interplay between the two is vital in developing a coherent portrait. Through interviews, the participant reveals self-perceptions and relates experiences from his or her point of view. It is the charge of the researcher, or portraitist, to put that data into the context of the bigger picture, which includes a much bigger canvas than only the words of an interview (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Much like a novelist paints a picture with words in order to draw the reader into another world, the portraitist creates art through “zooming in and out” repeatedly in the research.

This is related to Eisner (1986), who contended that the arts are, in fact, cognitive activities, and people make meaning through their interaction with art. Moreover, human experience is given meaning through the interplay of sentient beings with their context (Eisner, 2003). This interaction of humans with their environment is the basis for artistic expression and

meaning making. Moreover, Eisner (2003) contends that human sensibilities control our construction of consciousness and memory making. These memories, when made public, through such media as artistic expression, are then, and only then, given weight and importance (Eisner, 2003). This is the essence of Portraiture.

More specifically, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) delineate five elements of context that specifically shape the portrait, all of which are incorporated into my research. The first is a detailed description of the setting. As stated previously, understanding the environment in which a person exists is crucial for understanding the person (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2008). This cannot be attained through isolated, laboratory style research. In fact, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) specifically states that an individual may behave and respond atypically in an isolated environment, thus jeopardizing the validity of the data.

The second element that the authors propose is the “perch and perspective” of the researcher (p. 50). This is an element that is unique to Portraiture. The researcher is included in the overall portrait, much like a television journalist being filmed while conducting an interview. The reader is given a vision of the researcher’s point of view into the portrait. Instead of a distant, third person point of view, the reader becomes a part of the research through first person engagement. This approach makes clear the portraitist’s impressions and biases to frame the portrait. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) explains that this is particularly important to include at the beginning of the narrative in order to set the stage for the portrait.

The next element of context is Journey, Culture, and Ideology (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Understanding the background of not only the person, but also his or her family, work environment, and any other connections that arise is vital for seeing the person as a part of a whole. Lawrence-Lightfoot explains “The portraitist should always be alert to the convergence

(and contrast) between the external signs of the physical environment and the interior culture” (p.52). What does the environment say? How has history shaped the corporate culture in which an individual exists? These are essential elements to focus the portrait. This also speaks to importance of the use of the term “Latinx/a” and “Latinx” instead of “Hispanic.” “Latinx/a” and “Latinx” connote a much more robust meaning to the participants’ identities than Hispanic (Romero, et al., 1997).

Dewey (1934) also contends that the lived experiences of the participants are art in and of themselves. Individual history and meaning made from it are assimilated into the individual’s present being. As anecdotes and experiences are shared and enjoyed, they become artistic creations, brought to light to contribute to the greater portrait. The shared experiences imply meaning and give the audience insight into how the participant arrived at a certain place, time, and environment. The individual’s portrait is a culmination of distinct lived experiences, and the portrait illuminates how these forms of art interplay with the individual’s present context (Dewey, 1934). According to Dewey’s philosophy of learning through art (1934), understanding lived experiences are the first step in learning, and through this learning, meaning is made.

Central metaphors and symbols are the penultimate component to provide context to a Portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The development of imagery on the part of the researcher requires reflection on the data that goes beyond coding. This requires the researcher to reflect on the data as literature, to find symbolism in the data. This is consistent with van Manen (1997), who bases his phenomenological research design on emergent themes, not coding. The emergence of the symbols, and the portraitist’s perception of those symbols, plays a key role in shaping the context of the portrait. Again, the emergence of symbolism speaks to art

as experience, and the aesthetic nature that our backgrounds take on, even in everyday life (Dewey, 1934; Grierson, 2017).

Finally, the actor's role in shaping and defining the context is examined (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Through this outside-in approach, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) state that the researcher must analyze how the individual exists and affects the surrounding environment. Given the external environment, presence of the portraitist, personal and institutional history, and symbolism, in what manner does the individual exist? How has he or she been shaped by all of these factors, and how have these factors been shaped by the individual? How have the aesthetics of their experiences bridged the gap between the objective and subjective to bring coherence to the portrait (Dewey, 1934; Grierson, 2017)? This final element is the ongoing conclusion to the question of context.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology overarches the consideration and presentation of the research data through Connoisseurship, Big Tent Criteria, and Portraiture. Phenomenology seeks to make the implicit explicit and derive meaning from and through the lived experiences of individuals (van Manen, 2014). When two people have a conversation at a coffee shop, meaning is constructed through conversation, and each individual brings a perspective and bias to the conversation. Meaning is constructed and reflected upon, and understanding is not low-inference and centered around cold facts – it is developed over discourse between individuals. Interviews in phenomenology take on the same dynamics (van Manen, 2014).

In other qualitative methods, themes are codified, categorized, and developed. However, van Manen (2014) states that “these are not the ways of doing phenomenology” (p. 319). Instead, phenomenology seeks to search for structures of meaning that emerge from the human

experiences revealed through the research process. Phenomenology, according to van Manen (1997) is a method of extracting meaning freely by looking at the details of lived experiences and approaching those details without preexisting expectations. Using Eisner's four dimensions of Connoisseurship accomplished just that.

The human science nature approach of phenomenology leads to the meaning making of data. In my research, the lived experiences of all four individuals are woven together, separated, reflected upon, and woven back together to create a portrait of the group as a whole, as well as the four individuals (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997; van Manen, 1997). Through the telling of the small and large stories that emerged during this study, the complexity and strength of these four individuals is on display.

Participant Sampling, Selection, and Number

The individual Latinx school leaders highlighted in this research represent a variety of heritage, backgrounds, and professional and personal roles. To identify these individuals, I first sent interest surveys to potential participants who I either knew personally, were known by other potential participants, or knew other professional contacts of mine. I first e-mailed demographic surveys directly to each potential participant, using publicly available e-mail addresses.

To be considered for the study, a participant had to identify as a Latinx and hold an educational leadership role in a P-12, system or state level setting in the state of Georgia. I also considered demographic data concerning role, professional context, gender, and family heritage. This ensured maximum variance in the selected participants.

Nine individuals completed the demographic survey. First, the pool of potential participants is small given the dearth of Latinx leaders identified by the state of Georgia ("Downloadable Data | The Governor's Office of Student Achievement," n.d.). Next, two of the

respondents who initially consented to the study did not respond to follow up correspondence. After multiple attempts, I removed these two individuals from my candidate pool. With seven remaining volunteers, I opted to prioritize variance in family heritage over work setting. Since four of the volunteers were of Puerto Rican heritage, I selected the volunteer of Puerto Rican heritage who was a principal and also had Venezuelan descent. At the end of this process, I selected four participants. I selected a male elementary school assistant principal of Mexican descent, a female elementary school principal of Puerto Rican and Venezuelan descent, a female state coordinator for the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program of Honduran descent, and a female county level humanities specialist of Dominican and Ecuadorian descent. The selected participants represent a variety of personal and professional roles, as well as countries of family origin.

Data Collection

Utilizing the phenomenological method of data collection based on Van Manen (1997), data were collected through interviews, observations, document analysis, and a response to poetry. Interviews with each candidate ranged from a total of one and a half hours to three hours, with the average being one hour and fifty minutes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and follow up questions were asked until saturation or redundancy of data was reached. Each interview was recorded using an audio device and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. I also kept written and recorded reflective notes after each interview to remember details and my reactions to the different interviews.

The interviews followed the cycle of one phenomenologically based interview, and a follow up hermeneutical interview (van Manen, 2014). I first began with basic questions about the participants' personal and professional experiences, then asked follow up questions that

sought to bring out the emotion of the experiences. I did not merely seek to find out what happened, but sought to understand the emotion tied to the experiences. Questions were asked to evoke personal history and storytelling, which allows for patterns of meaning to begin to take shape (van Manen, 2014).

The phenomenological interview seeks to gather experiential data from the participant in order to construct a rich narrative of their experiences. The hermeneutical interview, which occurred afterwards, seeks to make meaning from the data collected in the phenomenological interview. These interviews took place in settings determined by the participants, based on preference and convenience. They ranged from a coffee shop to my own office. It should be noted that the participants who were interviewed in my office also had previously worked or currently work in my school, so there was a comfort level in the setting.

The semi-structured interview questions were generated in a manner to allow participants to tell their personal and professional stories with caution paid to avoid asking leading questions. Given that I did not employ a theoretical framework, I did not want to influence an individual's narrative in an unauthentic way. The questions (see Appendix C) sought to allow participants to take the conversation in a direction of their choosing. During the interviews, participants reflected on their histories and made meaning of those personal and professional experiences. Each individual shared poignant and powerful anecdotes. These stories at times led to tears, and served as powerful testimonies to the strength and determination of the four individuals.

I conducted onsite visits for three of the four participants. After the initial interview, one of the participants decided that she did not want to continue with the study, but agreed to have her interview data included in the research. For the other three participants, on site observations were conducted at the schools and offices in which they worked. These observations ranged

from observing the coordination of a Hispanic Heritage performance to walking the halls of a school. Observing and being a part of these individuals' work environments added tangible elements to their interview responses. Additionally, the coffee shops where two of the participants chose to meet me also provided insights into personal contexts.

Themes can also be derived from the analysis of a text (van Manen, 1997). Besides interviews and onsite visits, I also had the participants respond to the poem *América* by the poet Richard Blanco (1998). In *América*, the narrator reflects on a past Thanksgiving meal shared with his Cuban-born family. Participants responded to the poem's content and themes through reflective questioning using reflection questions from Intrator & Scribner (2014) (see Appendix B). While the narrator speaks from Cuban Americans' experience in the 1960's, there are themes around the cultural adjustment from a Latinx country and culture to a mainstream American existence. The lived experience of the narrator surrounding the Thanksgiving holiday, having parents who do not speak English, and gustatory misunderstandings all can draw out similar memories from the individuals participating in the study. The participants' reading of this poem evoked similar memories from their own pasts.

Two participants provided artifacts for analysis. One participant provided newspaper clippings and a VHS tape of a local news piece on his athletic accomplishments. The other participant provided a family photo in which she and her sisters wore clothing purchased by her grandmother. These items were not identified prior to the interviews.

Analysis Process

Portraiture “seeks to record and interpret the perspectives and experiences of the people they [researchers] are studying, documenting their voices and their visions—their authority, knowledge, and wisdom” (LawrenceLightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xv). In this way, I

listened, observed, and remained cognizant of all that was occurring in my surroundings.

Whether it was the subconscious wringing of hands or a pause to hold back tears, I made careful note of all that took place in the research field. At the end of each data collection, I reflected on my notes and recordings in order to make sense of the experience. These initial impressions helped me to remember not only the participants verbal and nonverbal data, but also my own reactions and interpretations of what had occurred during the interviews. I did this for each interview.

During this time of reflection and interpretation, I worked through the four dimensions of education criticism in accordance with the elements of Connoisseurship (Eisner, 2002) and employed the Big Tent Criteria (Tracy, 2010) to rigorously evaluate the collected data. In the first dimension, I vividly describe the individuals, their experiences, and their context. For example, what did the participant say? What kind of clothes are they wearing? What is on display in their office? Subtle details were recorded for later analysis. Next, I interpreted the data to derive meaning and connections between the participants, their contexts, and the sum total of the data I collected from them. I then evaluated the data as well as my interpretations in search of revelations and meaning of the individuals' lived experiences. Finally, I made general observations and conclusions to identify emergent themes to determine the whole as a sum of many parts.

I made the conscious decision to transcribe all of the interviews myself. This allowed me to listen to each interview at least three times and be able to listen for different elements and discover emergent themes during the process. I noticed patterns take shape in each participant's interviews as well as between the different participants' data. As Gilligan, et al. (2003) state, listening to recordings multiple times reveals "ranges in the harmonies, dissonances, distinctive

tonality, key signatures, pitches and rhythms always embodied, in culture, and in relationship with oneself and others” (p.157). After cyclically reviewing data, themes took shape and emerged through the Crystallization process (Tracy, 2010). I then organized the responses around the emergent themes. As I revisited each participants’ data, the process repeated itself. The analysis was ongoing as the portraits took shape.

The participants’ narratives slowly revealed themes, but often these themes rose to the surface in sporadic and disjointed places, so as the Portraitist, I had to organize the thoughts in a coherent and artful way. Just as a jigsaw puzzle starts with hundreds of separate pieces, some flipped over, some not, the portraits of this study did not readily assemble themselves. I searched for patterns and themes, and assembled the pieces to create the portraits.

As part of the writing process, I began each individual portrait with a dramatic portrayal of a memory that was conveyed during the interviews. I decided to do this to convey the depth of the participants to the reader before reporting the results of my research. Portraiture is meant to be enjoyed by a wider audience than just academics (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997), and the opening vignettes aim to hook the reader into learning more about these four individuals.

Determining Emergent Themes and Interpretation

In analyzing the participants’ responses to the poem, themes were identified through the thoughtful interpretation of meaning and application to one’s own experience. Experiencing life vicariously through others’ narration and lived experiences, fictional and real, can serve as case material for phenomenological research. This yields insight into notions and themes that are evident in other aspects of the researched individuals’ lives. For example, the use of poetry or a

short story of immigration to the United States, and the readers' connections to the story, can further develop the understanding of readers' own lived experiences (van Manen 2014).

Bias and Limitations

Limitations to the study lie in the fact that the lived experiences of only four individuals have been illustrated and examined and phenomenological studies are not generalizable. This does not provide an exhaustive depiction of the lived experiences of all Latinx administrators in Georgia, nor does the research examine all of the lived experiences of all of the school administrators outside of Georgia. Therefore, the findings are not generalizable.

Validity and Data Collection

To answer the question, "What are the lived experiences of four Latinx school leaders in Georgia?", I crystallized data from interviews, artifacts, document analysis, responses to text, and observation of context. Utilizing the elements of Portraiture and Phenomenology, data was crystallized from multiple sources to shape the essence of the individuals (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffmann Davis, 1997; van Manen, 1997). The first step in this process was thoroughly analyzing the data from all the sources in order to identify emergent themes and patterns. The data was then reviewed again to compare findings between the two passes. While this process occurred, I maintained notes on the two reviews in order to reflect on the process later.

While I formally reflected on the data at these specific times in the research process, data analysis was truly an ongoing, reflexive process. Data crystallized up through the writing process, in which themes emerged after being hidden in plain sight. This came from a consideration of the sum total of the data points, and the realization of connections between portraits. A depth of understanding was reached not just in formal passes of the data, but in the synthesis of information through the writing process. This crystallization of multiple points of

data allows for validation through the confirmation of details and reliability of the individuals in describing lived experiences, as well as validity of the data collection (Ellingson, 2014; Tracy, 2010). “Multiple types of data, researcher viewpoints, theoretical frames, and methods of analysis allow different facets of problems to be explored, increases scope, deepens understanding, and encourages (re)interpretation” (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). This ongoing, reflexive cycle of data analysis allowed for a natural emergence of themes, free of preconceived frameworks or conclusions.

Falling under the “Big-Tent” Criteria (Tracy 2010), I employed the Crystallization to analyze data because it fosters relationships and allows data to be rigorously examined and represented through a variety of artistic accounts in addition to more traditional reporting methods (Ellingson, 2014). For example, poetry, literature, or painting can be employed to communicate the findings of the research in a vibrant, symbolic way. “Crystallization is ideal for constructing portraits of everyday relating because it brings together vivid, intimate details of people’s lives shared via storytelling and art with the broader relational patterns and structures identified through social science analyses (Ellingson, 2014, p. 443). For this reason, I included reflections on poetry, the creation of authentic literature, and the display of a painting in the reporting of findings.

Crystallization has multiple tenets and Ellingson (2014) states that the researcher participates in a “willful crossing of epistemological boundaries” (p. 446). First, this approach produces knowledge through the process of rigorous interpretation of everyday experiences. Small and big moments alike were shared by the participants, and I thoughtfully considered them as I analyzed and derived meaning from the experiences. Second, crystallization utilizes both traditional analytic methods (such as constructivist or postpositivist approaches) as well as

creative approaches, such as visual or narrative approached. As previously stated, this manifested itself in the inclusion of artforms such as dramatized vignettes of the participants' memories. Next, this method weaves together representations in the data to form one unified representation of the findings. In my research, the unified portrait of the four individuals is seen in a painting that captured multiple memories and themes expressed by the participants during the data collection process.

Fourth, reflexivity on the part of the researcher is a vital component of the research process. This allows the researcher to explore his or her role in the data, as well interject him or herself into the presentation of the findings. Throughout my data collection, I was careful to record my own thoughts, reflections, and reactions through field notes. Finally, crystallization promotes constructed meaning making and subjectivity. Limitations and biases are celebrated as inherent in the research process and no attempt is made to mask the researcher's perch and perspective (Ellingson, 2014; Tracy, 2010). In the reporting of data, the perspectives and reflections of the participants and myself as inherently biased, but reflect the poignancy and power of personal experience in the construction of meaning of lived experiences.

Results

Portraits of Four Latinx School Leaders in Georgia

This section presents the portraits of four Latinx school leaders currently working in Georgia. In presenting these portraits, the authentic voice of each one of the participants is emphasized. When directly quoting the participants, the text is set off in italics. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, which resulted in repetitions, stutters, and false starts within the direct quotations. Participants, school districts, and other identifiable information have been given pseudonyms in order to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

The length and detail for each individual portrait varies based on the depth of participation within the study. All four participants participated in at least one interview. Three of the four participants contributed to the observations and literary analysis. Two of the four supplied artifacts for analysis. Additionally, the amount of time spent participating in the research and depth of detail varied between the four participants, and therefore the portraits also vary in length and description. Since trust is vital between the participant and portraitist, I was careful not to push participants beyond what they felt comfortable sharing. Moreover, the individual responses to questions dictated the amount and content of the data gathered.

Each participant's portrait begins with a dramatized portrayal of a particularly poignant memory that was shared during the interview. These portrayals were a result of a crystallization of the data. I selected each of the four scenes because I, as the portraitist, feel that the memory conveyed reveals something important about the character of the individual. As with all art, portions of the portrayal were created for dramatic effect. I wrote the portrayal with an intent to stay as true to the participants' accounts as possible. This is consistent with Ellingson (2014), who states "Crystallization brings together multiple methods and multiple genres to enrich findings and to highlight the inherent limitations of all knowledge" (p. 446). These portrayals are representations of the data presented as art.

Following the opening scene, I present a brief introduction of each participant, with an overview of the individuals' background, current position, and my connection to him or her. After the introduction, an in-depth portrait of the individual from a personal and professional lens is painted through words. The words of the participants and the portraitist bring to life formative experiences that shaped and influenced these four people personally and professionally.

The participants in this study are as follows:

- Rafael, an Assistant Principal in an elementary school, of Mexican heritage.
- Eugenia, an elementary principal, of Puerto Rican and Venezuelan heritage.
- Maria, a state coordinator for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), of Honduran heritage.
- Valentina, a county level literacy specialist, of Dominican and Ecuadorian Heritage.

Rafael: *“It Just Takes One to Believe”*

There was just a fence. On the other side of it, life would change. Months after telling his kindergarten classmates, *“My mom lives in the U.S. and she’s going to come and pick us up. She’s coming for us,”* Rafael, his mother, four siblings, and the rest of the group of Mexican immigrants were on the threshold of a new life. The coyotes had warned the group to wear black because of the U.S. Border Patrol helicopters monitoring the border. Rafael, at six years old, was in all black, but the pregnant lady beside him had on a white dress. As the whirl of helicopters approached, exhilaration quickly turned to panic. While he could hide under the cover of night, this lady was luminescent. Although six, Rafael knew he had to protect the woman, for her own good, but also for the good of the group. *“I grabbed a bunch of grass and put it on top of her, um, and I also kind of gently laid on top of her because I had nothing but black clothes on. I had to right then and there think of something quickly. Solve a problem that came up.* After a seeming eternity, the helicopter passed over the group without noticing them, and the small group stepped through the fence and into the United States.

Introduction

I first met Rafael after I spoke to a group of university graduate students about what I look for in when hiring administrative candidates. While most of the attendees shuffled out after the talk, I was approached by a tall Latinx man with hair slicked back in a short pony tail, goatee, and dark black rim glasses – similar to the type that are issued at basic training. After exchanging pleasantries, I could see a desire in him to grow in his career, and a desire to connect with me because of the Latinx population of my school. From our very first conversation, I could sense his passion for his community. Over the course of the rest of our conversations, I learned just how deep those passions run.

Personal History

His journey of thousands of miles brought Rafael here, to a coffee shop in an affluent suburb of Atlanta. As I drove to meet him, I passed through a variety of landscapes, from urban to rural to the strip mall pocked landscape of the suburbs. We picked a time in the early afternoon, which gave me time to drive across the city, and early enough so that he could make it to his second job, working at a shipping company. The parking lot was full of high end sedans and SUVs, as well as a golf cart, the preferred mode of transportation for many of the town's residents.

I entered the coffee shop, and I noticed that the vast majority of the patrons were White. And there was Rafael, sitting in a reserved room with a glass wall and door, sitting, waiting for me. With his hair slicked back in the familiar ponytail and wearing a t-shirt from the university where we met. It struck me as an intentional move, wearing this shirt. In a sense, it was a badge of honor. Even before hearing his story, it was as if Rafael was telling me, “Look at what I accomplished, after all those miles.”

We sat down at the end of a long wooden table and Rafael began to tell me his story. And throughout the hours of us sitting and talking, he rubbed his hands together, squeezing them as he thought, as if they would help him remember a few more details, and few more memories. He leaned into the table, eager to tell his story. He smiled and laughed quickly as he talked, and paid no attention to his flashing cell phone. He was totally present, and totally in the past.

Rafael told me about his childhood. He was born in a rural town in Mexico about an hour outside Guadalajara. The way he tells it, it is almost as if his childhood began once he entered the United States. The only thing he mentioned about life in Mexico was looking forward to his mother's return so he could travel to the United States with her. She had already settled in Atlanta with her brothers, and she was coming back for him, to take Rafael and his siblings away from their abusive father. After crossing the border, his first American memory was eating cereal, Fruit Loops to be exact, as he awoke in his first morning in the United States. *That was my first American experience.* Rafael laughs and tells me that Fruit Loops are still his favorite cereal.

After a long drive from California, Rafael settled in Georgia with his mother, siblings, and uncles. *It took us about a week and a half to get there.* His mother enrolled him in school, and in anticipation, Rafael began to practice his "English." *I used to think that English, when they say 'You got to learn how to speak English,' used to mean speak proper Spanish.* So, he practiced on the playground, attempting to speak his best English by speaking proper Spanish.

Rafael and his family, his mother and six of her twelve children, first lived with his uncles, and during that time, he found a father figure in one of his uncles. *He would come home from work – five, six o'clock in the afternoon, in the evening, and he would be like, "Hey, come on, let's go play." We'd go play soccer. "Let's go ride a bike" or whatever. Um, that was a*

lasting impact because he showed me that, you know, I don't have to be sitting in the house the whole day. Um, so he got me into sports. At the time, Rafael, nor his Uncle, would have no idea how athletics would change Rafael's life.

Rafael moved around in his first four years in Georgia, attending five different elementary schools. In these schools, the majority of the students were Latinx, and it was during these years that Rafael encountered his first influential teacher. *I think my third grade ESOL teacher really helped me out the most with learning and picking up the language. Um, and I think that had a big impact as to how I would teach ESOL students and how I would teach not only my ESOL teachers but also my regular students. I think she had a major impact on me understanding how to learn to read and how to teach somebody how to read.* The groundwork was being laid for Rafael to help ESOL students in the future.

When his mother purchased a house in his fourth grade year, his brother and sister were the only three Latinx students in a majority African American school. However, Rafael learned to assimilate, a life skill that would serve him well in his future.

It wasn't that different finding friends but it was a difference in not having somebody to be able to speak to in my same language and also talk about the same things that we liked. So I kind of had to quickly assimilate to what the likes and foods, even from foods to shows to sports, um, cause like I said, up to then I was only used to playing soccer. So I had to assimilate to learning how to like baseball, basketball, especially basketball in my 5th grade year and my middle school years. We were heavy on basketball.

In middle school, Rafael started to develop a goal-oriented mentality when he started to see others recognized for achievements. Considering the sacrifices his mother was making by working long hours to provide for the family, he knew he could do better. He remembered a

middle school awards ceremony in which he made a conscious decision to excel academically in order to honor his mother's hard work. *All the people that were getting certificates and medals for doing good with their grades, um, all the kids sat on the floor, and all the other students, we had to watch, on the bleachers. And so that pushed me.* By his eighth-grade year, he got to the floor. Even though his mother couldn't make it to the ceremony when he was finally recognized, bringing home the certificate made the effort worth it. *I was able to show her, "Hey, I know you're working all the time, but look, this is what I am doing at school."*

It was clear to me that all of these experiences from childhood related back to Rafael's mother. In almost every experience, his mother is somehow mentioned. Her impact. Her servant nature. Rafael refers to her repeatedly, as if everything he does is a way to pay her back for the sacrifices she made for him.

As Rafael entered high school in South Atlanta, he set a goal to graduate from high school, something his older siblings failed to do. During this time of life, he mostly kept to himself. *Back in high school I wasn't sure I could be a leader. Um, I had some doubts, you know, I like, I, I was seen, kind of like as a follower, but also like as a lonesome person. Um, kept to myself in high school a lot.* Being a private person, he never shared his motivation to graduate with anyone, not even his mother or uncle, but he knew what he wanted to do. *So my plan even as a ninth grader was to graduate from high school, work a couple of summers, save some money, and save enough money to go back to Mexico. And actually go back home and you know, find the industry where I could use my English language, um, maybe go to the Acapulco.* However, a chance encounter on the soccer field changed the trajectory of Rafael's life.

I remember my ninth-grade year, the spring of my ninth grade year, the football coach came out to the soccer field and he asked the head coach, "Hey, who out here can kick a

ball the furthest?” And he pointed to me. He took me out to the football field, threw a couple footballs on the football field, and he was like, “Here, just kick the balls through the goal post.” So I did it. I had never no training or anything. All three went through field goal post. He was like, “You’re our next kicker for the next three years.”

As he learned the sport of football, Rafael became a prolific kicker for his high school football team. He was so good that he was once recognized as the Georgia High School Athlete of the Week, for which he was interviewed with his mother on a local news channel. He also started to receive letters from college football coaches from the universities of Michigan, Alabama, and Illinois stating that Rafael could receive a full scholarship if he came and kicked for their teams.

The irony behind all of the accolades and letters is that football was still an unfamiliar sport to Rafael. He was much more accustomed to playing soccer with his family on the weekends. Even on the television spot about his prowess as a football player, Rafael showed off his various soccer jerseys. He admitted that before he started receiving the letters, he didn’t even attempt to understand the rules. *I didn’t know the rules. You know, at what point do I kick a field goal. At what point third, fourth, second - I didn’t know about those downs. I didn’t know about fumbles.* When he first started playing in tenth grade, he’d watch the game and wait, not knowing when it was his turn to go in. *Cause it was funny my tenth-grade year, you know, like, “Go kick a field goal,” “Oh, it’s my turn? Ok, let’s go.”*

A little confused how football could open up academic opportunities for him, Rafael enlisted the help of his tenth grade English teacher. *But even then, my junior year I wasn’t like, “Why are these schools writing letters to me?” Then my English teacher, that was helping me out, she started telling me, “These schools want you to go play for them. You can receive*

scholarships for them.” Over the course of his four years, this teacher became a mentor to Rafael, and saw potential in him that others had overlooked. *She introduced me into understanding that I can do better, and, you know, with this, you can go to college, um, I started thinking about that plan.* She guided him as he navigated the unfamiliar waters of preparing for life after high school.

During these high school years, Rafael also developed an interest in teaching. He enrolled in a Teaching Insights course during his senior year, which was a program for high school students interested in careers in teaching. This was a natural fit for Rafael, as he regularly tutored his younger siblings after school. *I always grew up helping my little brother and sisters, ah, with homework. So, I always kind of felt like I was kind of, ok, with helping kids, ah, with not only explaining something, but also teaching them.* Academically and athletically, Rafael began to carve out a new path for his life. Just as he led the way as he crossed the border from Mexico to the United States, he would lead his family in graduating high school and going to college.

His high school years were not without setbacks, however. From both an African American teacher at school and from the Latinx community, he experienced racism and people trying to deter him from success. *I had a Social Studies teacher which is kind of interesting, um, told me in the classroom that I shouldn't speak “that” language with my peers. The only thing I was trying to do, even back then, in that classroom is try to help my friend understand the assignments.* The irony was not lost on him that a Social Studies teacher told him not to speak Spanish. *I was thinking, as a Social Studies teacher, how can you first of all, kind of tell me not to speak a language when we're studying about different cultures and history of the world.*

He also battled negative attitudes from within his own community. When he began to play football in high school, he was approached by his brother in law's brother. He mocked

Rafael for playing football, and told him he wasn't going to be successful. *One of the things that my brother in law's brother said was to me, was, "Wow, look at you. If you can't even make it in soccer. What makes you think you are going to make it in football?"* But Rafael used these types of interactions as motivation. *I would take that as a, "Ok, thank you for saying that to me."* *Cause that only makes me fight a little harder.* When people doubted Rafael, he used it as motivation to work harder. He wouldn't respond, but he kept those moments as motivation to overcome obstacles. *You telling me I'm not going to make it; I'm going to show you I'm gonna make it. And that I think really inspired me to really understand the football game and really do well.* In the face of his detractors, Rafael excelled in the classroom and on the field.

Rafael did not just graduate from high school, he graduated with honors. He won the award for top male scholar athlete. *I was the number one student athlete for the school, for the graduating class. The highest GPA and the highest, best overall on the football field, or athlete in the school.* He didn't achieve this goal for selfish motivations, however. He did it to pay back his mother for the sacrifices she had made all along the way for him. *Cause my only goal back then was to graduate from high school. As kind of like a gift to my mom. Because I was going to be the first one to graduate from high school.* He admits, though, that without the help of teachers, he would not have made it. *I think in high school the biggest difference was finding some educators that really cared about me. That really cared about my future that showed me the pathway.*

When deciding on where to attend college and play football, Rafael followed the advice of an African American counselor at his high school, and he committed to play football at a college in Georgia. However, before he graduated, the coach of the team left that school and went to a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). Ever loyal, Rafael followed the

coach to the new university, and yet again found himself to be one of a few Latinx students in a majority African American educational setting. *It wasn't that hard, or, it was no culture shock, culture shock in college, it was just like me fitting in with the family. It was a family feel.* Since elementary school, Rafael had grown accustomed to assimilating into majority African American environments.

Being the first in his family to go to college was an honor that Rafael took very seriously. He knew that if he succeeded, it would open the doors for others in his family to also achieve this dream. While he earned accolades on the football field, Rafael started to focus on a career after college. Rafael set a new goal – be the first in his family to graduate from college. For that reason, he made sure he took his academics seriously.

I think just the experience of being able to go to a college and say I played college football” was a great experience. Um, and the which, at the end of the day kind of really molded me into ensuring that I did my part as the student athlete. And that’s a compound word. Student and athlete. Because I was so afraid that, to lose my scholarship in college, um, I had to make sure I was a good student. Um, there was parties, there were things to do on campus, but being the first one to go to college I think having that pressure of ensuring that you finish college as well to set a good example for others kind of molded me into ensuring that not only the athlete part was being, you know, taken care of for my part, but the student part as well.

It was during this time that his life after college began to take focus as Rafael pursued a degree in education. *I did a few practicums and I just stuck to it. I just said, “I’m a go into education.”* It’s this air of certainty that I have grown accustomed to seeing in Rafael. He sets a goal, and he achieves it. It’s that simple. Earning his degree and becoming a teacher was the

next step on a journey that started by tutoring his siblings, as well as the high school teacher preparation course in which he participated. It just made sense.

After four years in college, Rafael graduated with an undergraduate degree in teaching. Seeing his mother on his graduation day from college is a memory he will never forget.

Seeing my mom there in the stands, and, letting her see that another child can achieve something that you know is possible, and I told her, "You never told me, 'You need to stay in school, you need to stay in school'" like we tell a lot of our students in the school, but um, I just kind of wanted to show her that, you know, all the hard work that she did is paying off.

After graduation, Rafael moved back to Atlanta, and began teaching. It was early on in his career that he met his wife. *So, I met my wife right after college. Ah, I was at a teaching conference, um, trying to get a job. Um, she's a teacher, too.* His wife also has two daughters, whom Rafael refers to as his daughters. I was not surprised to learn that Rafael's wife is African American. Since elementary school, Rafael has assimilated into African American environments and connected with the culture.

I asked Rafael about if there is ever a disconnect between his wife and him given their different backgrounds. *There's never a disconnect. You know. We're both minorities, but we live in a majority community. Um, population is Caucasian, but um, we could come in here and I think we could have a full conversation with anybody.* Choosing to live in this majority Caucasian, affluent area seemed odd to me. Of all places, why here? But as I reflected, I realized that for Rafael, assimilation is almost a way of life. *You know, living here, I've learned to assimilate a lot. You know, throughout my years growing up. I learned to understand what*

different cultures like and do. From the age of six, he has been in situations where he was different, and he had to figure out how to survive.

Living in this community serves also as a symbol of success for Rafael. *It's an affluent community. Um, but I think I was just blessed to be able to afford to be able to live with her here. Um, but I think it's just a matter of working hard.* He is quick to point out, however, that he doesn't see a major difference in the style of life in one community or another. When his siblings ask him about where he lives, he only points out one main difference. *I tell them that life is not that much different whether you live here or over there. Um, it is quieter at night.* No matter where he is, Rafael has learned to fit in.

Professional Experiences – "Take out your phones, turn on the flashlight."

Rafael began his teaching career right after college in a suburban district south of Atlanta. He taught there for four years as a fourth and fifth grade classroom teacher. He then received his ESOL endorsement because he wanted to impact students with similar backgrounds to his. *Somebody like myself. Um, I did have those students in my classroom as a homeroom teacher, but I wanted, kind of, to work with them closer.* After receiving his endorsement, he taught one year of middle school, which he realized was not his calling.

During his first few years of teaching, the county in which he was working started furloughing teachers to account for budget deficits. In order to supplement his income, he started working nights at a shipping company, and he has not stopped. Just as his mother worked long hours, Rafael continues to work two jobs. *And that's what I've been doing since 2010. I work not only in the school, but in the evenings from 6 to about 10, 11 o'clock sometimes.* He now works the second job to pay for his daughter's education.

It was at his next school that he started to transition into a leadership role in his school. In the next four years, he became a lead ESOL teacher and worked on special committees within the school. *That school and the principal there opened me up into more opportunities for leadership.* This was Rafael's entrée into school leadership.

During this time, Rafael also found that many students at his school did not have the support that they needed at home to complete homework. So, in between his job teaching and his night job at the shipping company, he set up a table in a local park and began tutoring students in the afternoon. *I would go to the apartment complex, take the kids to the park, and I would do homework with them.* Driven by a desire to help students with backgrounds similar to his, Rafael would spend a few hours every afternoon helping out students to complete their homework. *So, I started doing that for the whole year. I would go there. I would, at one point, in the Fall, November, in the cold, it would get dark, soon, like around 6:00, ah, I remember one situ..., one time, that you know, I just told the parents, "Take out your phones, turn on the flashlight."* Even in the cold and in the dark, Rafael was willing to go the extra mile to help students.

At this new school, he became more comfortable in leadership positions. A long way from the high school student who mostly kept to himself, he now found himself in front of adults. *I think that experience there with leadership, um, as a lead ESOL teacher, I think just opened me up to making myself comfortable first of all being in the role of a leader in a school and then also being able to present in front of people.* As usual, Rafael assimilated and became successful in this new environment.

With the urging of his wife and colleagues, Rafael went back to school, got his Master's degree, yet another family first, and his leadership certificate. He applied for Assistant Principal

jobs, but did not find a fit, and he moved schools again. He was not without opportunities before this point, however. The county where he originally taught called him asking if he'd be interested in being an assistant principal at a dual language school. While initially interested in the job, Rafael was still working on his master's degree and knew he did not yet have the skill set he felt he needed to make the jump. *I don't want to go into something and then, something new, and kind of like be working on my master's as well. I like to be fully prepared for the new job. Cause I know it was a lot.* Always measured and strategic, Rafael knew it was better to wait.

In this new school in a new county, he was again the lead ESOL teacher, and his leadership experiences grew. He was given the opportunity to lead a summer enrichment program, which made him feel like a principal. *The principal allowed me to take the role of a, of a principal. You know, use this opportunity to make it your own program.* It was this experience that gave him the confidence to start actively pursuing assistant principal jobs again.

The following Spring, Rafael applied for assistant principal jobs around metro-Atlanta, and was hired out of an applicant pool of 300 people. In retrospect, Rafael is glad he waited. *I think I did the right decision of waiting to finish up my degree before I started the AP job. Because it was very stressful at times, but super busy. Waiting to finish his degree before becoming an Assistant Principal allowed Rafael to fully focus on his job.*

Currently, Rafael is an assistant principal at a metro Atlanta elementary school. The school is PreK through fifth grade, and serves 956 students. The student population is 96 percent Hispanic, as reported by the Georgia department of education, and 90 percent of the students are English Language Learners. When I visited him at his school, I quickly saw that this is a perfect fit for him. Rafael is exactly who his students and his families need.

I visited him at school on an early October morning, and driving up, I was struck by the contrast in environments between the affluent suburban coffee shop where we first met, and the urban context of his school. A street over from the school, men sat waiting for work outside shops with Spanish names. I pulled up to the school and it was apparent that Rafael's school has seen better days. As I parked, I was startled by the eruption of the HVAC system, and the building looked as if it had not been updated since the 1960s. Trailers lined the few grassy areas that the school had, and a disheveled dumpster sat on cracked pavement in a parking lot that seemed too small to fit the cars of a full faculty.

However, as I walked into the school, the vibrancy of Latinx culture came alive. I didn't realize it, but Rafael invited me on the day of the school's Hispanic Heritage Month performance. The two ladies at the front desk were wearing colorful dresses with flowers in their hair, and Rafael greeted me, wearing a black suit with a green shirt and red tie and socks – a subtle display of the colors of the Mexican flag. He had the familiar slicked back ponytail and signature thick rimmed glasses.

He took me on a quick tour of the school and introduced me to staff members and also a special guest visitor for the day's performance – a Latina business leader from the state power company. As he introduced me, I tried to downplay my role in the day's activities, stating that I'm at the school to "see Rafael in action." One of the first things I noticed in the school was how much the students here looked like the students at my school. I realized why Rafael and I connected so much during that first encounter – we both share a passion for serving the same types of students.

After the tour, he escorted me to the cafeteria, where final preparations for the performance were being made. I took a seat at the back of the cafeteria, trying to take the most

unobtrusive perch so I could observe Rafael within the greater context of the school.

Immediately, it was clear that Rafael was running the show. Third, fourth, and fifth grade classes arrived in lines and sat down on the cafeteria floor. The single row of chairs surrounding the area where students sat were filled with teachers and a few Latina mothers with small children. Most of the teachers appeared to be female African Americans. Besides the music teacher conducting the student chorus, I was the only white male in the large room.

Rafael opened the show by greeting everyone, “Good morning. Buenos Dias.” He introduced the first act, the chorus of students. As they sang, he took pictures from the back of the cafeteria. He then introduced the next act, a pair of dancers from Vera Cruz, Mexico, and after they performed, he introduced the next speaker, a local Latinx police officer. Then, a teacher from the school read from a power point about the history of Hispanic Heritage Month, and what it means to be Hispanic. The show was capped off with the special guest, who I met earlier. She spoke of her own experiences growing up, which were strikingly similar to Rafael’s. She spoke of following your dreams and highlighted inspirational Latinx figures. She told students, “Never be ashamed of who you are.”

At some point during the first show, the principal entered the cafeteria, dressed in traditional Latin clothing. While Rafael was fully engaged in the show, the principal seemed to float – not engaged with staff nor students, and was consistently on his phone during the performance. It made me sad to see the disconnection, but as I glanced towards Rafael, he didn’t seem to notice. Perhaps this is how it usually is.

At the end of the performance, the students were dismissed from the cafeteria by the principal, and then the stage was reset for the performance for the lower grades. As students entered the cafeteria, they hugged Rafael. This second time around, Rafael seemed to grow more

confident in his role as coordinator of the show. He danced with students as the chorus sang. His positive presence filled the cafeteria. The principal did not attend the second show.

Between the two shows, I talked with the guest speaker, and I suggested to her that she include Rafael in her examples of inspirational Latin figures. She told me that she intended to do that in the first presentation, but ran out of time. However, when she presented the second time to the lower grades, she talked about Rafael to his students. She explained how Rafael's heroism in caring for his students is an inspiration to her. Rafael's reaction to the surprise was one of humility. I have come to know Rafael well enough to know that on the outside he was humbly stoic, but on the inside he was glowing.

After the second show, Rafael led the guest speaker and I back to his office. Along the way Rafael explained that the classroom doors were decorated by parents for Hispanic Heritage Month. Rafael's office door was marked with a portrait of him on his door. I assumed that the painting was made by a student. In the portrait, he has the familiar glasses, goatee, and is wearing a bright blue shirt and red striped tie.

Rafael's office is a long, rectangular, windowless room with his desk in the middle, set off against the wall to the left. At the front of the room, to the left as you enter the door, were boxes of refreshments and permission slips. Farther back, testing bins were stacked up and behind his desk sat filing cabinets and a banner of his alma mater. On the wall, Rafael has his diplomas displayed. On his desk, he has a daily devotional, *La Biblia a Mano* and a photo of two chihuahuas. It looks like a combination between a PTA storage room and a typical assistant principal's office.

The three of us sat and chatted about the school, and Rafael's newest idea of starting a computer class for his parents. It is apparent that on top of his assistant principal duties, he also

serves as a liaison to the students' families. I wondered what the parent involvement in his school was like before he got here. It's clear his presence has made an impact. Rafael also talked with the special guest about plans for an upcoming ceremony. In the same place where Rafael tutored students at the folding table until dark, there will now be a pergola constructed in his honor where students can meet and learn. The ceremony would take place the following month. It will be called "The Learning Nook." This space serves as a symbol of Rafael's impact. What began as a simple table, illuminated by the cell phones of parents, is now a wheelchair accessible learning space that can comfortably fit up to fifteen students.

Leadership

When asked about his leadership style, Rafael is quick to reference his mother, and how she was always concerned with taking care of others. *At the end of the school year this past school year we do a big lunch before our teachers before they go home. Um, you know everybody kept asking me, "When are you getting something to eat? When are you getting something to eat?" Um, but I told them you know how I'd rather have everyone eat first then I'll go by, There's plenty of food.* Rafael sees his role as a school leader to serve others.

Sometimes, you know, we would end up with about 2, 3 custodians in the school. You know, just like I told everybody, I come from a hard working family. I don't mind picking up the broom and sweeping if ya'll need assistance. Ya'll let me know. And there were some times where we would have to pick up the broom, the principal and I, and just sweep the hallways just to make sure you know, that the school looked good for the community.

Rafael also sees the importance of being a Latinx leader in a school for Latinx students and parents. *A few kids I would say, would tell me you know, "I never saw somebody dressed up*

like you.” When he was growing up, Rafael never saw any Latinx males dressed in suits. Moreover, all of the Latinx males he knew had day labor jobs. Serving as a role model for his school community is important for Rafael, in the same way that being a role model for his siblings played a big part in his desire to achieve his goals.

He also sees his leadership position as a way to help parents. *I think being as a first-generation immigrant, kind of helps me be able to make that connection with some parents.* He can connect with them in a way that many school leaders cannot.

Even though you're not from the same place, you are still able to connect with them, and I think the parents see that. Um, because a lot of people, a lot of the parents, like I said, they are from Guatemala or from Honduras, and we have different cultures than from Mexico, and its different from my upbringing. But, they see me as a person that they can approach.

Influential Figures

When Rafael thinks of the influential figures in his life, he lists three people: his mother, his uncle, and his high school English teacher. In a methodical manner he worked through why he felt that these three people made an impact on his life.

Mother – Rafael spoke about his mother throughout our time together. She seemed to provide the motivation and strength that Rafael needed in order to achieve what he has accomplished so far in his life. Her inspiration and impact didn't come from words as much as it did with her actions. *With her it was more of seeing what she did on a day to day basis.* She taught Rafael work ethic and how to care for others. She also helped Rafael's family transition from life in Mexico to life in the United States, laying the groundwork for Rafael's ability to assimilate into new environment. *We kind of blended in from our traditions, um, you know, to*

American traditions, Santa Claus and presents. Through her working long hours, she provided for her children. Despite these long hours, she still made time for her family. These lessons shine through in everything Rafael does, from serving students at his school to working an extra job to pay for his daughter's education.

Uncle – Although he moved back to Mexico years ago, Rafael feels that his uncle served as the father figure he needed during his youth. Not only did his uncle get him involved in sports, but he also provided life lessons about hard work. Rafael recounted a time when he sat with his uncle after Rafael received a paycheck for a part time job. *He was like, "If you ever doubt that you did something to not earn that check, that means you didn't earn it. So the next week, I need you work harder to make sure you feel like you earned that check at the end of the week."* From his uncle, Rafael learned that you need to go above and beyond in your work, and success is earned.

Teacher –It wasn't until tenth grade that Rafael had a mentor in school who truly believed in him. *I never had a teacher who actually told me, you know, "You have the potential to do a little better."* So, once I started working with her in high school, she really made that impact on me on understanding that, *I think I always knew I could do a little better.* This teacher helped Rafael see his potential, and also served as a guide to graduating high school and attending college. Without her, Rafael contends, he wouldn't have seen the path to college that was provided to him through football and academics.

Poetry Reflection

Below is Rafael's response to the poem *América* by Richard Blanco (1998). I have included his personal reflections in their entirety to let him tell his story.

América reminds me mostly of the gatherings that my family had when I was a child. All major holidays, Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, Fourth of July, etc., were the same in our household. All my family that lived nearby would visit my mother's house for the food and dancing event; my uncles, cousins, brothers and sisters would visit us. Although we would celebrate these holidays with the traditional American foods, my mother would always cook something to remind us our heritage: Pozole, birria, camarones a la diablo, tamales, tacos de azada, etc. Our first Christmas here in the states, I remembered my mother cooking a turkey for the first time; the turkey was donated by a local church. We also had dressing and cranberry sauce, but to please my uncles and cousins that visited I remembered that she cooked a large pot of chicken pozole.

My mother was quick to adapt to the American culture and explained to us that we should celebrate the national holidays like everyone in the states since we were now living in the United States. On the Fourth of July, we ate hot dogs and burgers with some tacos de carne azada on the side. For Thanksgiving, we had the regular turkey and dressing, with pozole or birria on the side. For New Year's we would have some greens, cornbread, and chicken, with some carnitas or tamales and atole on the side. Like Blanco's parents, grabbing items for our traditional dishes required going to the nearest Mexican food store since neither Kroger, A & P, nor Quality Foods carried the items that my mother needed. Everyone loved coming to the house and enjoyed the food, music, and laughter that our family events had.

My uncles and cousins would talk about returning home and building their own houses and buying land during all of our family gatherings. They would talk about all that they missed from back home: the Sunday soccer games they would play in and that they would watch on tv, the

weekends going to el palenque (arena for bull riding), the dances in the city square, listening to live mariachis, and of course the cantinas. Over the years, with a lot of work, some of my uncles and cousins would actually go back home and realize their dream...sending money back home on a weekly basis to their spouses or parents allowed them to build their own homes and save enough money to go back home to create a living. Other in my family, including my brothers and sisters, would stay here in the states and find themselves someone to build their own family here, or bring someone, usually the men, who they considered their girlfriends to the states to build a life here in the states.

Still to this day, this poem reminds me of my childhood life with my family. Unfortunately, now that all of us are married and we all have families, this tradition only comes around during the Christmas holiday. It is wonderful nonetheless, all of my family gathering around and having both American and Mexican food and enjoying our time together is a wonderful experience. Those uncles and cousins who are no longer here with us are missed, but calling our sisters and family via apps that make it possible for us see each other on the phone is a wonderful experience since they get to tell us about everything that they are doing and enjoying back home.

Maria– *Ok, what's next?*

The silver lined subway doors opened and Maria crossed the gap and got in the car. The eerie stillness of the world post 9/11 was still hanging in the air. Despite the tangible gloom, bonds formed between total strangers, bound by the common experience that ripped so many lives apart. Maria sat down on the hard plastic bench and put her purse on her lap. Numb with boredom working at an insurance brokerage firm off of Wall Street in the down season and

rattled from the unspeakable terror that she witnessed on that day a few short months prior, she knew that there was something more to life.

She looked across the aisle and saw a male student, trying to finish his math homework on his lap. He was struggling to answer the questions, partly because of the jostling of the train car, but partly because his teacher had gone too fast that day. At first Maria tried to ignore the struggle. But after three more stops, she looked over and said to him, “If you want, I can help you with that.” “Umm, yeah,” the teen muttered, and slid over to the seat next to him.

Before long, this was becoming a part of her commute home – tutoring students on the subway. She made sure to leave work at exactly five o’clock in the evening so she could meet her regular students on their way home. Over time, she started tutoring those same students at local libraries. She did it for free. She had a good job; she didn’t need the money. She just wanted to make a positive impact on the world. After seeing the worst in humanity just months before, Maria wanted to make the world a better place, one student at a time.

Introduction

I have known Maria for over three years. I first met her when I hired her to be an interventionist at my school. She began her time working with a group of fifteen students who needed just a little more attention, a little more of a push, in order to pass the end of the year test. She came highly recommended by my Assistant Principal, who used to teach with her at a former school. Valuing the opinion of my colleague, I didn’t even interview her. The job was hers if she wanted it, and she took it. When the Literacy Coach position opened up later on that year, Maria was my first choice.

Little did I know that years later, after she moved on from my school, I would find myself in my office once again with her, learning about her personal and professional

experiences. I was excited to learn more about her. Anyone that works with her knows she is all business, and I was hopeful that she would give me just a little more of a glimpse into what makes her tick, and the experiences that have shaped her into the woman she is today. I reached out to her, and set up a time to meet, and she opted to meet me in my office, which was the sight of many, many previous conversations between the two of us, including the conversation she had with me letting me know she received a job offer from the department of education that she couldn't refuse. Maria is the type of person, however, that you know you will run into again, and I have. Now as a state ESOL coordinator, I run into her at conferences and trainings, and we always have lots to talk about.

Personal History

Although she grew up in New York City, Maria was born in Honduras and lived there until she was two months old. Her parents lived in New Orleans in the months leading up to Maria's birth, and a business trip by her mother resulted in Maria being born Honduras.

I was born in Honduras, I came here. It's funny because when people actually find that out, they're like, "Was it difficult to come to the United States?" I was like, "On a plane?" You know, I mean my parents were already residents when I was born in Honduras, so they um, lived in New Orleans at the time. And so I was born there because my mom ended up being a bigtime landlord from what I understood. Um, and had several properties she was getting ready to sell off so she could stay in the United States permanently. And cause she had to keep going back and forth. And so in the back and forth I was born.

Her parents did not care for New Orleans, so they decided to start life again in New York, where Maria, her two brothers, and her parents would live for the next two decades. *New York is*

such a melting pot as they say or some sort of a salad cause there's people from everywhere.

Maria's father opened his own business, while her mother got a job as a chef in the building of an investment banking firm. Life was not easy, as her parents struggled to make ends meet and learn English. Her parents had to work hard to succeed, and learn as fast as they could. *And to um, basically build themselves up from the ground up here.*

They came here and had to learn how to communicate fluently, um, in English, and had to learn how to work um, as far as with um, like cause my mom ended up working for an investment banking firm, um, she was their chef. And so you know, she had to learn, kind of like she had to learn the business too, because you know, um, a lot of business was discussed around the lunch table or whatever else.

Her parents' path to the United States was far from easy. Her father didn't finish high school and her mother was orphaned at the age of eleven. *My mom got a chance to go to some English schools in Honduras, um, growing up, until her parents died. And she lost both parents when she was 11 within a month of each other. So that's when her education kind of stopped.*

The sacrifice and struggle that her mother, in particular, made for Maria and her two brothers is something that has stuck with her and serves as a driving force for her career aspirations.

Multiple times, when reflecting on her mother's experiences, Maria started to cry.

As she grew up, Maria excelled in school, and cites her commitment to her parents' dream of a better life as her motivation. Even though she was still learning English, her mother stayed engaged in her education. Maria remembers how she assumed the role of translator for her mother as she attended parent conferences. Throughout her childhood, Maria's mother pushed her daughter to receive the best education possible.

However, Maria's mother's desire to learn English resulted in Maria not speaking Spanish at home. Maria remembers her mother's friends giving her a hard time about not speaking the language.

But I was getting called out by a lot of her friends. So, be it her Honduran friends or Colombian friends, or whoever or the Latina friends that came by the house, they were like, whenever they would come by and talk to me in Spanish I would answer in English because that's what I was told to do. And they were like, "Ah, muchacha, como tu no hablas Español? You know, you're Latina, you should know, you know."

So Maria asked her mother to start speaking Spanish in the home, and Maria focused on learning Spanish in school. *And so it wasn't until I was in high school where I took it, I took it uh, formally. I aced, I took it because I knew it was going to be easy. Not that I couldn't read and it write it, and I basically I'm self taught to read and write.* Since then, Maria and her mother have begun to communicate in "Spanglish," mixing English and Spanish. She recounted a time when she and her mother returned to Honduras, and the tables were turned. While Maria worked on improving her Spanish, her mother's Spanish had become Americanized.

So she was trying to place an order in a restaurant. And she's in in in New York it's totally fine cause everybody understand you with Spanglish words that she was asking for, excuse, una tomada natural, y ella quiere manzana y um, sandi, but she didn't say sandia. She said, "Quiero una tomada natural de, este, manzana, y watermelon." Straight up. And I'm literally, I'm hearing this and didn't even think about it. And the masero is like, "Perdon?" And and so he's going back and forth, "Perdon, perdon." I was like, "Mami, watermelon is not a word, it's sandia." "Oh, muy bien! So lo trago, se lo traje.." So anyway, um, we ended up having a good laugh over that even with the

masero. And I was like, "Mami, your Spanish has gotten," she was like, "I know, that was the New York Spanish."

After high school, Maria attended New York University (NYU) and ended up majoring in sociology and minoring in finance. *When I graduated I was trying to figure out what I was going to do. I lived in New York at the time, which is like the financial capital of the world. And um, you know you go into business.* After interning at a large corporation, she ended up getting a job with an insurance brokerage firm. She initially resisted an interview, but when she finally relented, she was quickly hired. *So next thing you know I was becoming an insurance broker and I was basically working quote-unquote on Wall Street because I like two blocks away, right directly behind the dorm where I, I stayed my junior year.* She started work, having no idea that the world was about to change.

About a week after she began working at the firm, the terrorist attacks of September 11 took place. *I always try not to cry. Um, it was, an eight and a half hour walk home. And I saw a lot of drama and stuff that I really don't want to get into now, but, because that will make me cry more.* This experience weighs heavily on her, and the emotion of it halts our conversation. I don't think either of us expected this emotion to come out.

As was the case with so many people, September 11 made Maria realize that there was more to life than working a corporate job and earning a good salary. She started to see opportunities to help others. *During that time when I was working, you know, I would find myself on the subway offering, like I would see a student studying you know be it math or whatever else.* So, on her way home from work, Maria would tutor students on the subway for free. She even started to meet those students at a local library for more tutoring sessions. *That's when I realized that I was in the wrong field.*

Professional Experiences – “You’re kind of like an anomaly.”

Maria’s journey to school leadership began as she ate lunch at her desk in a New York City office building. Bored during the insurance low season, she began reading the Atlanta Journal Constitution on her computer. After reading an article, she closed the window, and a pop-up ad appeared. *And it’s like, “Click here” and little rainbow colors and I was like, “Is this a virus?” You know, I didn’t know what it was. So I ended up clicking hesitantly and the window opened back up and it said that Atlanta Public Schools was looking for teachers to come out of the business world.* The seed that was planted on subway rides home was starting to take root.

Maria had always been interested in Atlanta since she visited as a junior in college. Now, as the low season in the insurance business gave her time to contemplate a career with more purpose, she decided to make her move. *So, um, yeah, next thing you know I, I, well, I submitted my application I was granted an interview. It was a two day interview process. And when I thought I was going to come down here to start talking to districts, I was moving down because I had been granted the position.* Maria’s business background allowed her to be entered into a program in which teachers obtain certification by taking night classes while teaching.

Her first teaching position was as a first-grade teacher. She only had eleven students and all of them were African American. In fact, she was the only teacher on her grade level without any English Language Learners in her class. Like many other Spanish speaking teachers, Maria started to have translating duties on top of teaching responsibilities. *I noticed that we had one Spanish teacher in the school and I noticed that every time they needed a translator when they found out I spoke Spanish they would always pull me if he wasn’t available.*

It was at this school where Maria had her first encounter with an being Afro-Latina in a Georgia school. *And um, my very first school year, um, a lot of people were trying to figure out*

my last name but wouldn't ask me. It was clear to Maria that there were conversations taking place, because she continued to be asked questions by other staff members. *The secretary says to me, she was like, "So, when is your husband going to stop by and you kids?" And I'm like, "What? You know, I'm like, "What husband, what kids?" And so she was like, "Well, aren't you married to a Mexican guy or something?"* This encounter was in addition to others in which African American staff members had difficulty accepting Maria's heritage.

Um, and the issue I had were mostly with African American people asking me like, "Explain your last name." Like, like, it was almost like almost like combative type question how they would come to me and they're like, "Ok, so I've been trying to figure out your last name. Explain it." And I'm like, "What? You know, like, "What are you talking about?" And so I would explain and you know, my family's from Honduras and you know, we're Hispanic, like you know, and they're like "Well, where's Honduras?" You know, and I'm like, "Really? You're an adult and you don't know? And you're a teacher and you don't know where Honduras is? But ok, fine." Educate, Maria, educate. So, you know I'm like, "It's a country in Central America, smack in the middle, pretty much. You know, whatever." "Oh, girl, you're just black." I'm like, "Ok, fine." You know, obviously I know I look African American, but you know, there's more to me than just my look.

Her time at this school was short because the school was closed due to declining enrollment. However, Maria soon found that her Spanish language skills opened the door for an unexpected opportunity. Around March, she was called into the principal's office and informed that she would be teaching at Hanaford Elementary the following school year. This was surprising to her, given the fact that she had already found a job closer to home. *And I was like,*

“What? Wait? Where’s Hanaford? Like, what are you talking about? I already found another job.” As it turned out, principals of other schools in the district selected teachers from the closing school based on their resume, and Hanaford selected Maria because it is a Spanish-English dual language school. After Maria was told the news, she was approached by the front office secretary. *And so she was like “You got Hanaford? Be grateful.” And I was like, “Ok, why?” You know like. So anyway, she says, “Just look it up, I’m going to tell you it’s like the greatest school. People can’t get in there even if they try.’* Maria’s ability to speak Spanish opened the door for her to go to a highly sought-after elementary school. Her experience with her mother’s friends giving her a hard time about not speaking Spanish had paid off years later in an unexpected career opportunity.

But it’s funny because it’s amazing how you adjust to the environment, but what I learned at that point was, be proud of who you are, by my mom’s friends. You know, like, carry that with you. And, and, I didn’t realize that speaking Spanish, because like I said this happened in my teens, but coming down to Georgia and being able to carry on a conversation, I, I would never say my Spanish is perfect. But being able to carry on a conversation and teach or, um, help out, has taken me way further than I ever anticipated. I never even knew that it was like a benefit, to be honest with you. But I realized in so many different ways that it was. And I realized that I got positions over other people just because of that.

At Hanaford, Maria taught Kindergarten, and in her class she had a significant number of Spanish speaking students. *I was teaching kindergarten, and I was teaching bilingual kindergarten. So my goal was to get them to speak English by the end of the year.* It was also during this time that Maria realized her passion for teaching English Language Learners, also

known as ESOL students. While some of her students were pulled out for ESOL instruction, Maria worked with a small number of students who spoke Spanish in the home, but didn't qualify for services. *I would have about 10 students left, and so when I had those students left it was myself and my para until she got pulled for lunch. We just went in and those kids grew like no tomorrow. I ended up teaching them first grade standards because I taught first grade the year before, so I knew what they had to learn.* During her two years at Hanaford, Maria's calling to teach was affirmed. *And my kids they just blossomed and grew and I was like, "I love this."* After two years at Hanaford, Maria decided to move on to another school. The distance from her home was too far, and she was still taking certification courses at night. Twice in her two years at Hanaford she almost fell asleep behind the wheel while driving home.

The following year she moved to a new school in a new county primarily because it was close to where she lived. Again, she taught kindergarten. Her time in the new school, which was the majority African American, made her realize how deep her passion for English Language Learners ran. After one year, she transferred to another school in that same county with a high ESOL population, where she found herself teaching bilingual Kindergarten yet again.

During this school year, Maria also decided to go back and get her ESOL certification. *I realized at that point like I said, um, that I liked working with ELs, I said, "Ok, well I have to find a way to work with them as their teacher, as an EL teacher, not just as a homeroom teacher."* She attended a local college and obtained her ESOL certification in an intensive summer-long program before she moved onto her new school, Montclair Elementary.

In her return to a school with a high number of English Language Learners, Maria saw the impact her presence had on parental involvement at the school. Her ability to communicate directly with Spanish speaking parents allowed her to connect with them in an authentic way.

She not only was able to hold conferences without interpreters, but she helped them navigate the school system. *And it was just, they just felt, and they were like, "Gracias, gracias." Just, so helpful and so grateful that I was able to communicate with them.* This hit home with her, because it reminded her of her own mother's struggle to overcome the language barrier and be active in her daughter's education.

Maria taught fourth grade her first year at Montclair, and was given a challenging assignment. *I didn't really want to go 4th grade but apparently a tip the principal had had a group of ELs that had gone, you know, for a number of years and were kind of, um, their test scores were very, very low. And, needed a lot of support.* After teaching a year of fourth grade and a year of kindergarten, she finally got the position she desired. *Anyway, I had my intro to ESOL that third year at that school and I loved it.* She ended up teaching ESOL for three years at Montclair. However her time at Montclair came to an end because of budget cuts, which continually reduced her salary. So Maria moved onto her next school in another county.

At her next school, Maria got her first taste of school leadership, as the lead ESOL teacher. It was during this time that she made a difficult decision that would haunt her for six years to come. *I was offered the opportunity to interview for um, an instructional coach position, and I turned it down. Pretty much, the job was mine.* She had promised the principal at her school that she wouldn't leave. *So because I am a woman of my word, I turned down the position. And it took 6 years after that to get an instructional coach position.* She ended up finishing the year at that school, but then decided it was time to return to her roots.

A charter school in New York offered Maria a short-term contract and be an ESOL coordinator. *Now the funny thing is, in my heart of hearts, when I started teaching down here, I knew that some, at some point I was going to go back to New York to teach. Like I knew that I*

was gonna go back and serve my community. She was back in familiar territory, staying with a friend from her old church, and was in New York for a few months. She was successful in her role, and the school offered to extend her contract for the entire year. But she had come to a realization. *I realized then, I was no longer a New Yorker.*

Maria came back to Georgia. At this point, her mother moved to Atlanta to live with her. Maria explored employment opportunities with the WIDA Consortium in Wisconsin, but she decided to continue her teaching path in metro Atlanta. *And you know I was thinking of uprooting my mom and everything. And I was like, "That's not fair to her."* At this point Maria had also entered into a doctoral program at a university in Atlanta, so her roots were set in Georgia. She got a job in a school in the school district where she originally started teaching, and she was given a familiar challenge. *Um, and had a challenging year just because the group I was given, or, the group that I got had um, three teachers quit before me.* As was the case with her past challenges, Maria succeeded through determination and belief in students. *They were first graders and they were so behind. But I told them, I told my very first speech with them, I said, "You all will learn how to read and you're stuck with me for the rest of the year."* True to form, Maria finished the year and her students were successful. However, her desire to get back into school leadership caused her to continue searching. After that one year, she left the school and took a job working for an educational technology company for eight months.

It was during her year teaching first grade and eight months working in the private sector that Maria felt like all of the doors to school leadership were closed. At times she looked back with regret about turning down the instructional coaching position years before. She had been an ESOL lead and served as a consultant, but it felt like things were not moving in the right direction. *It was kind of like I had gone backwards because you know, when I was in New York,*

I was in a leadership role, I was consulting, I was independent, I was doing what I wanted to do.

I had done ESOL and I just kind of wanted to move up with that. But I found myself stuck.

However, she explored options in the Spring for the following school year. Maria started applying to school districts and got an interview. She interviewed at a school, and what she thought was a position for the next school year was a position that needed to be filled immediately. *So she said, "We would like for you to start, like, as soon as possible. And, actually next year I want you to be the RTI coordinator and I want you to be the ESOL lead."* Maria accepted the position and the door back to leadership was beginning to open.

During this experience, Maria was able to resume her role as a school leader, but she also was confronted with poor leadership on the part of her principal. First, at the beginning of the following school year, the principal wanted her to be both ESOL lead and RTI chair. Maria expressed her concern that taking on both roles was not realistic. *And I kept trying over the summer I kept trying to have a sit down with her and talk to her and tell her you know or or ask her you know how what was her vision or how does this look you know.* After multiple conversations and a stressful summer, her new principal relented and eventually dropped the RTI responsibilities.

This was a sign of a difficult year to come for Maria. *The school had because of the principal's leadership the school had a lot of drama and was not cohesive and the ESOL team was a hot mess.* The ESOL teachers were not held accountable before Maria took over, and she ended up having to have some difficult conversations with low performing staff members. *Um, and so eventually a lot of them ended up leaving because they realized at this point they couldn't just escape under the umbrella of ESOL and not serve the kids properly.* Maria's passion for

providing a high quality education for ESOL students prevented her from turning a blind eye to poor performers.

Her principled nature also caused her to hold her principal accountable. *I didn't really care for the principal and at this point, because I had discovered she was doing some things with ELs that was really not legal. Um, and I had to report her to the district, um, she wasn't too fond of me at this point either.* So, at the end of the year, Maria decided to transfer back into a full time teaching position, but had to do it in a covert way, as her current principal tried to block her leaving. In Maria's opinion, this was a vindictive move because of Maria raising concerns about the principal to the district office.

Um, and so she was like, "Was it really that bad?" And I'm like, "Well, you know what, you weren't really allowing me to do my job. And when I told you, you know, you asked me, you hired me to be able to tell you what needed to be done. And when I told you what needed to be done and some things you shouldn't be doing, because its not ethical and its not legal, you got upset. And you want, insisted on doing it anyway. And I'm not going to be a part of that." You know and so she was like, "Oh ok, I understand" but she was all upset about it.

So, Maria transferred to a new school yet again, and found herself outside of school leadership. She wasn't excited about going back into a homeroom teacher position, but her experience at her previous school was so toxic that she had to get out any way that she could. It was at this point that my path intersected with Maria. My Assistant Principal had taught with Maria at Montclair, and highly recommended her for an interventionist position that I created over the summer. I needed someone to work with a small group of students whose performance needed to improve. Little did I know, this was one of Maria's specialties. I had my Assistant

Principal reach out to her and gauge her interest. The timing was right, and Maria left the homeroom position in order to come to my school to be an interventionist.

Maria worked with the 15 fifth grade students for the first semester to improve their reading levels. *And I really had a great time. I was given 15 students to work with, and we had a great year. And the teachers that I worked with, it was phenomenal.* Halfway through the school year, our Literacy Coach was hired away by the state department of education. Maria didn't expect to find her way back into school leadership at my school. *So I applied and um interviewed, got that position, and I was now, I had my toe in leadership. I, my foot in, like two feet. And I was like so excited and so grateful. And I just really considered it a blessing because I was finally where I wanted to be.* The school is majority ESOL, so Maria was able to use her expertise and passion for ESOL students in order to help teachers. She was also charged with the implementation of our Spanish-English dual language program. Her two passions, language and literacy, were combined into one role.

As is the case with her career, though, Maria's journey quickly brought her to another opportunity. Through her graduate school, she saw a job posting for a school improvement specialist with ESOL experience with a Regional Educational Service Agency, under the umbrella of the Georgia Department of Education. Having just reentered school leadership in the coaching position, she initially didn't consider applying. *So after a sit down with my advisor, she's like, "Look. Basically, I think you should apply for this this this this reason, whatever else."* Maria applied, passed the phone interview, and then went in for a face to face interview.

She went into the interview with low expectations, but in the back of her mind, she was nervous about what would happen if she did, in fact get the job. The idea that she could go from school level literacy coach to a state level leader so quickly after a roller coaster journey to

school leadership seemed improbable at best. She entered the panel interview, and Maria's head was spinning. She was asked about her experience as a Reading Interventionist and as an ESOL lead. They then explained how roles would have to be combined because of funding. *And I was like, "Ok," I didn't exactly know what everything meant because it was just kind of like a whole lot.* As it turned out, the agency was searching for not only a school improvement specialist with ESOL experience, but also someone to run the ESOL endorsement program. The woman who would become Maria's boss told her, *"You're kind of like an anomaly."* All of Maria's experiences in the multitude of schools coalesced into this position.

The journey that led Maria from New York, in the shadow of the World Trade Center, to Georgia and her current role was a long and winding one. The many experiences and schools created a unique skillset that truly makes Maria an "anomaly." While her path will continue taking her to new places, for the moment she has arrived. She runs a reading certification program entitled "Growing Readers" and also runs the ESOL certification program for the state. *I manage the endorsement and 16 instructors under me.* As she continues with her newest role, her next stop is anyone's guess.

Leadership

Maria always wanted to get into school leadership, but she never felt that the traditional path was what she wanted. She had multiple principals and assistant principals encourage her to take the principal track. *And I was like, "Is there something else that could possibly lead to leadership?"* While her path was nontraditional in that she did not stay at any one school for more than five years, she collected experiences and learned from school leaders along the way. *I consider myself a lifelong learner. And I'm a big believer in whoever I'm around, learn something from them. Take something away.*

She also talked about the encouragement that she has received along her path. She brought up leadership lessons that she learned with me, which was flattering. *I can say that, with the exception of that one principal that I had in DeKalb prior to coming to Lake Forest, all my principals including yourself um, have always encouraged me and I've learned so much from you.* Now, as she leads other ESOL leaders in the state, Maria passes on the lessons she has learned in order to positively affect the education of ESOL students all over Georgia.

Influential Figures

Maria brought up a number of individuals who have helped her along her way, but the three individuals that she points out as having a large impact on her life is her mother, a former work colleague of her mother's, and then her family and friends, in general.

Mother - Her mother's presence can be felt throughout Maria's story. Starting with the heartbreaking story of losing her parents when she was eleven, to her move to New York so that Maria could receive the best education possible, to her constant encouragement and advice throughout Maria's career path, Maria's mother's influence looms large in Maria's success. She serves as an inspiration for her daughter, and her dream of a better life for Maria and her two brothers fuels the desire that Maria has to be a leader.

Mentor - Additionally, Maria saw one of her mom's colleagues at the investment firm in which she worked as a mentor to her. *I was the first in my family to go to college. First to do a whole lot.* This individual helped her navigate the unknown world of college and her professional career. He also helped her realize that there is more to life than accomplishing goals. *He's like, "Maria, you need to stop and smell the roses." I was like, "there's no time for that."* His influence gave Maria wisdom and encouragement, and throughout her life, he made himself available to help as Maria continued to grow.

Younger Brother and Friends - Finally, Maria acknowledged how her friends and family are important to her – especially her younger brother. *We spent we spent a lot of time together. My mom was working and like if I need anything or need some support or whatever, like he's like the first person I call, or he calls or you know after my mom of course. You know, we're just really, really close.* Moreover, she stated how her friends are always willing to help, and that she is appreciative of all of the individuals that are in her life.

Eugenia - *No matter where you go, there's something you can impact.*

The snow fell softly on the trees. The campus of this small, all women's college in suburban Massachusetts was a scene out of a picturesque Christmas card. Within the stillness of the campus, the classrooms were full of students. And within one of those classrooms, Eugenia sat in the back, silent as usual.

The professor that day wanted to challenge the class. She wanted to push the thinking and belief systems of the students – push them out of their nests. She posed the question, “What is something that your parents told you as a child that you believed to be true, but now you don't believe?” The class fell silent for a moment, not used to such an uncomfortable question. Hands slowly started to raise, and the Cinderella and Santa Claus stories started to be told and retold. The professor, growing frustrated by the lack of depth from her students, decided to take matters into her own hands.

She called on Eugenia, the only student of color in a class as white as the freshly fallen snow. Eugenia was the quiet one in class, but her papers painted a different picture. She had lots to say, but just held back in front of her peers. “Eugenia, why don't you share what you think?” After a brief hesitation, Eugenia really didn't enjoy speaking in front of crowds, she began. The power of her words stilled the classroom, save an awkward cough and chair scraping the floor.

The depth of experience put to shame the fairy tale ramblings of her classmates. Eugenia was no longer silent.

Introduction

I met with Eugenia three separate times. Twice in a suburban coffee shop equidistant from my house and hers, and also at her school, located south of the city by the airport. Her school is glistening, with the polished look of new construction. This contrasts with the abandoned laundromat building and empty lots that surround the school. In the center of a depressed area, the school arises as a beacon of hope, and I felt that hope as soon as I walked in the doors.

When I entered Eugenia's school, I was greeted with a warm welcome from the woman sitting at the front desk. The school's awards are displayed in a wooden bookcase for easy viewing as you enter, and the school's teacher and professional of the year are commemorated on a sign next to the awards. The TV in the foyer displays smiling students, and flexible seating in the midst of a mini-library fill up the space to the right of the front desk, next to the cafeteria. I was surprised by this environment. You wouldn't guess that the school is labelled "chronically failing" and the risk of state takeover looms. The school, despite high levels of poverty and low test scores, has taken on the vibrancy and passion of its principal.

Personal History

Eugenia's story begins with parents who met in Puerto Rico. Her mother, whose parents arrived in Puerto Rico from Venezuela, met her father, a Puerto Rican of African and Taino Indian blood. *And actually my grandfather, hated my father.* Her parents met, married, and attended the University of Puerto Rico together. In 1968, Eugenia's parents moved to New York, and her older sister was born, and Eugenia a few years after that. When Eugenia was in

second grade, the family moved to upstate New York because her father got a job at a university there.

After her father finished his degree at that university, the family moved to Massachusetts, where Eugenia would spend the rest of her childhood and college years. Within the first eight years of her life, Eugenia and her family went from a diverse, multi-ethnic New York City to a majority White town in Massachusetts. *New York it was more, it was very segregated, but it was more diverse. Right? So, it was ok.* Eugenia and her family found that their new home was totally different from their community in New York City. *And then we when we moved to Massachusetts we lived in the suburbs, and we were like the only Puerto Rican family in a white neighborhood.* Diversity did exist in the area, but not in the part of town where Eugenia's family lived.

There was a North and South and we lived in Frenchtown. So the Puerto Ricans that did move were, like I said, mostly tobacco fields or they're welfare, right? So, welfare was um, they would advertise for welfare housing in Puerto Rico to the United States in New York and Massachusetts started because they're not too far away. So, you have a lot of um, that's when the population started to grow. But it would be in the North End or South End. When we lived in the suburbs which is like of Mass, Springfield, Massachusetts was like not as, not at all, I mean not at all diverse. So predominantly White, predominantly White schools.

As a Puerto Rican family living in an affluent, majority White suburb, Eugenia's family was aware of the weight of responsibility to represent their race and culture well. *And there was this clear understanding of, living in Massachusetts, really understanding that most majority of people didn't look like us.* They were also aware of the double standards that existed within the

town. *Because if you're a kid playing in dirt, it looks different than your White counterpart who are playing in dirt and they're going out. If you have ice cream all over your face at the, we had Friendly's in Massachusetts, if you have an ice cream on your face, that looks different than Sally whose running around with ice cream on her face.* Eugenia and her sisters were held to a higher standard.

Along with her immediate family, her mother's parents also moved to Massachusetts after her grandfather retired. Already familiar with Massachusetts from graduate school, Eugenia's grandfather and grandmother knew the importance of representing yourself well in the community. This was of upmost importance for Eugenia's grandmother. *So she was a loving grandmother, she would take care of you, but it was about how, what your, she felt that this was an appearance. So when you were with her, you had to look a certain way.* While her mother clothed Eugenia and her sisters in hand-me-downs and clothes from cheaper stores, her grandmother ordered them clothes from catalogues and shopped at high end stores to ensure that they were dressed well.

These high standards also existed for academics on both her mother and father's sides of the family. *My mom's grandfather, which was my grandfather, my mom's dad, who was very huge about the educational track. Like he had to make sure that you were, wherever you were you had to be at the top of your class or you had to do this, and you had, because not because grades are important, because I expect anything that anyone whose related to me to be the best academically.* On her mother's side, the legacy of education and attaining university degrees went back generations, to Eugenia's great-grandparents.

While they may not have gotten along, Eugenia's father was on the same page as Eugenia's grandfather regarding excellence in academics. This was especially important to her

father, as his own parents did not attend college. However, more than improving social status, Eugenia's father's viewed education as a way to impact the community and improve the world. *One of the biggest things that before any formal education in college or post high school education, in my home, my family, my grandparents, and my parents and at home was very huge about impacting the community. It was like, big.* The question, "So how did you make it better?" and "What was your impact?" were questions often asked by Eugenia's father as she grew up.

Despite her family's educational focus, Eugenia was not without struggles in school, especially in Math. *I remember Math wasn't easy for me. I remember running to the bus stop with the times tables. Like my mother was like, "Do it again, do it again."* She also was overly social. Even as a minority, she found school a place to socialize just as much as learn. *And I talked a lot. I talked to anybody, I'd talk to the wall, but I talked a lot.* And if she brought home a bad report card, it wasn't just her parents to whom she would need to answer, but her entire family.

As the years went on, Eugenia continued to struggle in Math, and ended up going to summer school. However, in summer school, she found a new, diverse world with students who came from much different homes than her affluent classmates. *But it was like, it was ok. Because summer school was fun. It was like when you got to be around inner-city kids.* Since the Math summer school course only took the first month of the summer, the following year she figured out a way to stay in summer school for the entire summer. The alternative would be tutoring younger children at a community center with her father. As many teenagers would, she preferred to spend time with her friends. *I was like, "How do I get to go to summer school again*

next summer?" I was like, "French. I'll fail French." So, she strategically failed French, and spent her summers with the inner-city kids.

Eugenia attended two different high schools during this time. She began her high school career in the public high school. However, her father abruptly withdrew her from the public high school and enrolled her in a Catholic high school after an incident with a teacher. *I had to do this paper on Mao Zedong, And I remember my father helping me with the paper. And um, probably got 4 versions ripped and thrown in the trash but I remember it was on his computer.* This was not a unique scenario, as Eugenia's father would often throw away her work until he deemed it excellent. Despite the multiple drafts and polished final product, Eugenia was given an F on the paper because the teacher thought Eugenia was writing a paper on a different historical figure. *I think there was something along the lines of like, something with racism that had occurred about the paper because my father knew he had walked me through, like he had the assignment and I completed the assignment the way it was.* While Eugenia doesn't know what was discussed in the conference, her high school was abruptly changed.

Despite her challenges and summer school, Eugenia still excelled academically, and was able to take advantage of a program in Massachusetts that supported female minority students to attend college and pursue careers in the medical field. *And so, I chose a school, that, um, was a small Catholic all women's college to go to and I was going to be in the Science, I was going to be a Science major.* After taking nothing but Science courses her freshman year, she decided to pursue a different degree. She developed a friendship with another minority student at the college who was already an education major, which helped influence her decision to switch and pursue teaching. Her experiences with her father tutoring at the community center and the

multitude of conversations about impacting the world planted a seed that would grow into Eugenia's decision to become a teacher.

In college, Eugenia continued to experience life as a minority in a majority white context. *So there weren't people who were from the community of diverse, so there weren't, there wasn't a large Puerto Rican pop, there wasn't any, I was the only one.* On campus, Eugenia was one of the few minorities, and she was one of the only American born minorities. Because she excelled academically, her white counterparts would have to ask for her notes if they missed class. *It was almost an insult because they didn't want your notes. They wanted it from their white friends.* Because of her academic achievement, one of Eugenia's professors encouraged her to enter an assistantship program in which she student taught and received her Master's degree in English as a Second Language. From here, Eugenia began her career.

Professional Experiences – Like, but they know that there are black Latinos, right?

Eugenia started her one-year assistantship teaching English in an elementary school in Massachusetts while she obtained her Master's. She worked on a team of transitional bilingual teachers, teaching English language learners, the majority of whom were from Puerto Rico. Even though she spoke Spanish, Eugenia taught the English to the students. After earning her Master's degree, she moved to Georgia.

She began her career in Georgia teaching ESOL in Atlanta for three years. Eugenia left after those first three years due to a negative culture. *It was not a good mental place for teachers. Right? I love the kids, but it was not a great place. Administrators were horrible to teachers.* It was these memories that would help Eugenia learn how to build a positive culture even in difficult circumstances.

It was also during these first three years that she began to encounter a new type of racism, this time from African Americans. She found that moving to Georgia was culturally difficult as an Afro-Latina. *Moving down in Georgia, it was very deep seeded. Like, it's very deep seeded about either you're black or you're white. And if you're black, or you present as black and you don't honor that blackness, you are almost insulting it. So there's no room for your Latinx, there's just no room for it.* She found that even the slightest acknowledgment of her heritage could spur malicious statements from others.

I remember one woman she was a retired teacher in the media center. And I was working with the ELs, and it happened to be Mexican, it was a Vietnamese population at one school, but this school, it was a Mexican population, and the lady said something like, "Oh, you're Mexican?" I say, "No, no, I'm not Mexican." And she said, "Well, I think if you put 'em all in a bucket, and dump them out, they all turn out eating tacos." Like, and I'll never forget that expression. Like, everybody you, she said that to me, and I was like 22, 23, maybe a little older but, I was just like, mmm, so I knew it was like, and she was doing it to insult me. It wasn't, she wasn't saying it like, this is how I really think. She was doing it because she wanted to insult me for saying that I was not African, like, I'm not African.

Eugenia transferred to another metro Atlanta school system after those three years, where she continued to teach ESOL. After a year at the new school, Eugenia moved to Maryland, where she developed more expertise in teaching reading. *So they hired me, they had a full time teacher, then they hired me part time as an ESOL teacher and part time as a Reading Recovery*

teacher. So that gave me a strong background in literacy. During this time she obtained her certification in Reading Recovery as she continued to teach ESOL.

After her three years in Maryland, Eugenia moved back to Atlanta to teach ESOL in fourth and fifth grade in another school. During this time, she also decided to get her doctorate in teacher leadership. She discovered that she had a passion for helping disadvantaged students, and that desire wanted her to help other teachers grow to be the best they can be. She wanted to have a bigger impact and make the world a better place. *“How do I improve the staff?” Because I want all the students in my room, and I can’t have all the students in my, type of thing. So how do I become that leader?* Eugenia got her doctorate to allow her to lead and support teachers, but at the time she didn’t feel a desire to be a principal. However, in order to leave the door open for career opportunities later, Eugenia obtained her leadership certification three months after earning her doctorate.

Soon after, Eugenia moved into her first leadership position, as a Curriculum Support Teacher at an affluent elementary school north of Atlanta. Although the school did not have many small groups, Eugenia pushed teachers to improve their practice even though test scores were already good. *The CST position was definitely a position that could help that. But it was about really impacting the teachers. And I was all in.* She worked there for three years, and then was named Assistant Principal at the school where she taught ESOL before moving to Maryland. It was at this school that she started to feel a burden for ensuring that effective instruction was happening for all students. *My whole focus wasn’t, “Ok, you can close the door and, you know, turn the lights out, and the kids are going to do well. But it’s like, our teachers aren’t teaching effectively.* Thinking back all the way to her childhood and her father’s desire for her to have an impact on the world, she found her calling. But she knew that her career journey wouldn’t end

there. *The AP thing is cool, you know, you're doing all this grunt work, and, you're working on a team. But if I'm going to do this, I might as well be a principal.* And after two years as an Assistant Principal, she had that opportunity.

Eugenia had offers to become the principal of two different schools, but opted to lead the school with a large ESOL and Latinx student population. *I was like, "I, I, I have to do this."* So *that's where I came in, have passion about we're going to impact the community.* Additionally, her other option was the school where she was a CST, and her desire to make an impact and change would be more difficult given that she had already worked at that school.

Eugenia experienced a lot of success in the six years as principal of that school. In fact, when I visited her at her new school, her office was decorated with memorabilia from that school, including her award as Area Principal of the Year. On top of propelling the school to academic excellence, she was able to serve the Latinx community and connect with parents. Being able to speak Spanish and connect with Spanish speaking parents opened doors to parent participation that would normally be closed. But over time, the demographics of the school changed, and she felt it was time to move onto a school where she could yet again make an impact.

She interviewed for a middle school position, but the position was given to someone else. *I think I was strategically not given the position when, from where I'm standing, that doesn't make sense to me.* Even though she was principal of the year and successfully led one of the elementary schools that feeds into that middle school, she was passed up for the position. *"Hmm, what's going to be the better optic for this situation?" Which is the reality, right? And it's not necessarily about me; it's about so how are others going to perceive it.* At this point in her career, Eugenia was disappointed about being passed over, and ready for a new opportunity.

And then I got the phone call... The area superintendent called me and said, "We'd, um, (the Assistant Superintendent) feels you'd be a fit for this school. We, we asked a couple of people, no one wants to do it, blah, blah, blah. Turn around eligible. And then that's where I was just like, "Absolutely!" And even when I talked to my staff it's like this growth and development of, and really this feeling like, "We gotta to do something! We have to do something!" Like, this is not school. Like, our kids come to a building and we need to make it school. And so, um, I think it all goes back to that thinking of, what impact can I make? Because I have an opportunity to change the community through education.

Eugenia was back in her sweet spot – working at a school with an underserved minority population. She was back where she could make an impact. *This is a school that has consistently been failing. And when you, I mean when I say failing it's even failing at the point, not anymore, but failing at the point where how we let parents go into the classroom at any time.* This was an opportunity for Eugenia to make a huge impact.

As part of the transition to the new role, Eugenia was asked to write a brief biography to introduce herself to her new school community, which is primarily African American. *When I wrote my bio, um, for being um, you know, being honored to serve the community as a Latina. That line got taken out.* Other elements about how she served the Latinx community were also removed. *It was more or less, "We're going to look at your resume and your experiences, not who you are. And we definitely don't want to shine that."* However, assimilating into a community in which she is a minority was nothing new for Eugenia, and a reminder of the prejudices she still had to face as an Afro-Latina.

It's not about just the language, it's about you're denying, if you're speaking Spanish, looking the way you look, you're denying the fact that you look like me. It's just, it's it's it's weird, and it, but it's uncomfortable, but it's true, right? It's what happens. It's like you can't. You know, I mean, people and they feel very comfortable telling you, "You know, you need to stop all that Spanish talk in here." And, but it's not from this lens of, and then I've had people come to me and say, "You know, this teacher said that you don't think you're black." To what, well, you know, you know, someone who felt comfortable saying, so I said, "So what did that mean to you?" Is, before I respond, and I say, well put it this way, "I definitely know I'm black; I'm not African American," Right? And that's, I would, I too, and it has nothing to do about me when I say, that would be an insult to the struggle and suffering of African Americans to present myself as something that I'm not. I said, "But definitely I know I'm black. I can look in the mirror and see that, right?" But, I also have a whole another side of me that is beyond that. That has to do with culture, that has to do with the, the the language. It has to do with the role of developing English. It has the, the, the language proficiency. I said, all of that is a totally different plight.

The tension of expressing her Latin identity within her context is apparent. *So, um, I may be in my office talking on my phone in Spanish, or I may come in the morning and have my Spanish music playing, and then, I think twice, I have to think twice about it.* Her son, volunteering his time at the school, added to the complexity when he appeared in Eugenia's office during my visit, wearing a shirt stating "Proud to be a Black Man." I asked Eugenia and her son about how her children feel about their Latin heritage, and it's clear it's not something that they often consider. After hesitating, her son mentioned that he's comfortable around Latinx

people, and that's probably because of his mom. However, growing up in Atlanta, it is easier to identify as an African-American man than an Afro-Latinx man.

Even though Eugenia no longer leads a school with a large ESOL population, she stays connected to the work by teaching ESOL teacher certification courses. Her desire to help teachers reach English language learners of all nationalities comes from her own experiences Speaking Spanish at home while learning in all English environments. She spends her nights teaching these classes not for the extra pay, but for the positive impact that effective ESOL instruction has on students. As always, if Eugenia can't teach the students herself, she wants to be able to support teachers in providing the highest level of instruction possible.

I always feel like I'm still impacting teachers who are going to be supporting English Language Learners. And I look forward to those opportunities because we have such great discussions and great opportunities for the learning. And even though we have a syllabus and we have these um, key takeaways, that the teachers have to take away so they can impact your teaching, um, it just gives me hope every time, right? And it's not just about of course, you know, my, my second language is English, but Spanish being the demographic but it's for all people who are learning languages. And, being able to some people will go to work in an environment where its predominantly Korean, which will look different. Um, their instruction predominantly Spanish will look different. Culturally different, you know. Mexicans, that demographic who are first generations to where areas, oh there's just a new crop coming in. So, I just find that huge in my ability to stay connected with the work and impact the teaching of it.

Leadership

Throughout my time with Eugenia, I saw different components of her leadership. Social Justice Leadership was woven through all of her roles. She views her role as a school leader as a way to impact students, especially disadvantaged students. In fact, when the demographics of her elementary school changed and she had less English Language Learners, she decided it was time to move on to a school where she would work with students in poverty. Her father's legacy of making an impact in the community plays out in her desire to create educational equity in a chronically failing, or "turnaround eligible," school.

She also demonstrates an instructional leadership style. For students to experience a socially just, equitable education, high levels of instruction must occur. She holds teachers to high standards and demonstrates clearly what she expects in terms of instruction. The display of the current school score looms over her front office, which serves as a constant reminder of the need for high levels of learning, and high levels of accountability, to occur within the building.

The impact of Eugenia's leadership is undeniable. From the moment I walked into her school building, I could feel the legacy of excellence that her father and grandmother expected from her. From the organized calendar of events to the ABC directory of procedures, even the front lobby speaks to the order and focus that she has brought to the school. As we walked the building, students and staff greet her, and she greets them by name. In fact, right before my arrival she had lunch with students who need extra attention to keep them on the right track. She has set up a model classroom to make her expectations for effective instruction clear to staff. In all that she does, she demands excellence. The work is far from over at Eugenia's school, as it continues to be on the "Turnaround Eligible" list, but she continues to live out the legacy of excellence that has been instilled upon her from a young age.

Influential Figures

When asked who her most influential figures are, Eugenia identified members of her family, both immediate and extended, and two of her college professors. Each individual has contributed something unique to her, and she has carried those lessons throughout her life.

Father - Eugenia spoke about her father's influence on her. Over and over again, the theme of impact would arise when considering his influence on her. *No matter where you go, there's something you can impact.* His background working in the peace corps in Thailand, on top of his humble beginnings in Puerto Rico, influenced the way in which he raised his four daughters. They were not to be takers. They were to give back.

His influence is apparent in Eugenia's desire to be in schools where she can have an impact. Not only does she pour into her school every day in order to positively change the trajectory of her students' lives, but she also is an active member of her community. *It was this-this servantness. And like, if this doesn't happen, the world won't be what it needs to be, or what it can be.* She serves on the board of directors for the student and adult leadership programs in her majority white community. She served on the board of a Latinx school administrators association. Eugenia's father taught her that it isn't enough to be successful. True success is helping others.

Grandmother - Eugenia also discussed her grandmother's influence at length. Dressed in furs and riding around suburban Massachusetts in a two seater BMW, her grandmother was always conscious of how she would be perceived. This attention to her appearance did not come from a place of vanity, however. As a Latina living in a majority white community, Eugenia's grandmother understood the importance of dispelling stereotypes and not giving prejudice a foothold. Presenting your best self was of utmost importance so that your accomplishments would be acknowledged.

This influence can be seen in the appearance and presentation of Eugenia's school. Located in a poor community, it would be easy to succumb to outside impressions and place little value on appearances and feed into the stereotypes about the school. However, the school is quite the opposite. The building and all inside it is on par with any school in a more affluent community. Eugenia beamed when telling the story of an affluent church from Florida visiting her school to help teachers set up classrooms. They were impressed with the appearance of the building. *But even hearing the conversations from the um, teams, they were like, "Oh, their schools look just like ours."* Appearance affects perception, and Eugenia's school projects excellence. Her grandmother would be proud.

Mother - Eugenia also discussed her mother as an influential figure. While her father and grandmother emphasized excellence, her mother serves as her cheerleader. *It's this constant affirmation in the work of leadership that is much more um, celebrated by my mom now as an adult.* Even as a child, Eugenia's mother was most concerned with making sure her daughters had what they needed. She serves as a nurturer to counterbalance the high expectations that Eugenia and her sisters were held to.

"Big Sister" - Eugenia's "big sister," the one who convinced her to be an education major, continues to be her best friend. A native of St. Croix, she was one of the few other minorities with Eugenia in college, and also an education major. Their shared experiences and passion for education serve as a support system for Eugenia. She had a relationship with Eugenia's grandmother, as well. *They would have long conversations, she and my grandmother, and she even talks about some gems that my grandmother gave her.* Eugenia's best friend will occasionally evoke these conversations when giving Eugenia advice.

Her Children - Finally, Eugenia finds that her children serve as influential figures in her life. She has three children from her previous marriage, and a fourth “son” who came to live with her while he was in high school. His mother and he became homeless in high school, and he was friends with Eugenia’s daughter. Eugenia took him in and he continues to live with her as he goes to college. All four of her children are either in college or in the working world now. *When you have adult children, it’s kind of weird, because you’d think they’d be off, not in not even interacting with me, right? But they are very much involved in the day to day life.* She remains close with her kids, going on monthly outings with them and staying in constant contact through social media. Their success in life drives Eugenia to continue to strive for excellence.

Poetry Reflection

Below is Eugenia’s response to the poem *América* by Richard Blanco (1998). I have included her personal reflections in their entirety to let her tell her story.

I was connected to the often disconnect between my desire to eat items like with my peers and my family. I recall desperately wanting to be able to drink Kool-Aid© and my parents would either buy fruit juice or make juice drinks such as ginger tea and ice tea. One day my mom conceded to making Kool-Aid© and complained about all the sugar needed to make it even though the packets were 10cents each. I felt connected to what my friends in school discussed Kool-Aid© and was pressured by my parents not being interested. I felt connected to the poem from the experience of experimenting with concepts of the culture that weren’t in my home.

My family experience didn’t include disconnect from the American holidays. We were very much a part of the American holidays and added additional holidays such as 3 Kings Day which is observed in honor of the three Kings that brought gifts to baby Jesus and occurs after

Christmas and New Year's Day. How we celebrated and with which foods and meals was very much ours.

The meaningful part of the poem is the overarching idea that living in America is as if living in two worlds. The family connection and culture in contrast to the mainstream acceptable culture.

The part that stood out was the concept of not seeing images that looked like me on TV growing up. Being Latinx of browner skin hue it was even more disconnected because the characters that were more of my hue still were compromising a connection because they were not Latinx. I always made a connection with characters that looked like me and even that was limited.

The poem supports my thinking that family is important and family culture is the basis of one's decision making into who they will be and what one will bring into their personal culture. Feeling confident and supported in one's family culture allows the opportunity to be confident when developing one's personal culture.

Valentina – *I'm a Dominican Ecuadorian woman, what am I doing for my, like, Latinx like brothers and sisters?*

The taxi cabs and muffled merengue beats echoed between the brick buildings of New York City. Valentina, her sister, and her mother were hard at work cleaning their apartment on a hot July Saturday afternoon. As she wiped down the kitchen table, Valentina heard the vacuum cleaner click off, and watched her mother walk over to the tape deck. She pressed play and Celia Cruz's voice filled the apartment. Valentina left the rag on the table, and her sister emerged from the bedroom. What was once a small living room now became a dance floor for the mother

and her two daughters. This was their Saturday ritual - cleaning and dancing, even in the thick heat of a New York City summer.

Introduction

I have known Valentina for a few years now. I was first introduced to her as our “new bilingual literacy specialist.” Her current role is Humanities Specialist who works with 18 different schools to support literacy and Social Studies curricula. Over the course of our time together, she has delivered countless professional development sessions for my staff, and I have worked with her on writing curriculum implementation. She carries herself with confidence and is comfortable speaking to a cafeteria full of teachers. I have always been impressed with her content knowledge and professionalism. She takes pride in her work, and the positive results speak volumes about her leadership.

We met in my office for both interviews because Valentina is always on the move. She has a cubicle at a central office building which is lined with photos of her husband and two children, but she spends most of her time in schools. Finding time to sit down and talk with her was hard enough, so we had to take advantage of the little space on her schedule that she did have. The first interview was during a lunch break during a principals’ meeting held at my school, and then we found another hour sliver in her schedule in October.

I knew a little about Valentina’s background before we met – we are the same age, she grew up in New York, and she taught for a time in Harlem, but I was eager to hear more of her story. I grew up three hours from her up I-95 in Rhode Island, and I was interested to hear how someone my age grew up in a totally different world from my affluent, majority White, suburban upbringing.

Personal History

Valentina was born in New York City to a mother from the Dominican Republic and a father from Ecuador. She grew up with her mother and older sister in the same one bedroom apartment in upper Manhattan that her grandmother moved to in the 1960's with six children. The community was diverse; most of the residents were Dominican, with Greek and African American residents also filling the apartment buildings. *We would walk outside of our apartment, and it was all over. You could have a Pastelito on the corner. You know, you went to the bodega and you heard the music blasting, the merengue blasting.* The vibrancy of culture was everywhere.

Valentina's father did not live with her but was a constant presence in her life. Having moved to New York City at about the same time as her mother, her father came to New York City to pursue opportunities and a better life. *He worked hard, got his GED, then became a waiter at some big restaurant in Wall Street.* He went on to take a few college classes, and ended up opening an electronics store in the Bronx. *I lived with my mom; my dad would visit like two to three times a week. Um, and so it was different from my cousins and my neighbors who had a mom and a dad in the household, but it was all I knew really.* As she grew up, Valentina's mom served as the caretaker, working in a factory in order to provide for the girls, and her father served as the encourager to pursue excellence in academics.

As she grew up, Valentina was deeply connected with her Dominican roots, but knew nothing of her Ecuadorian heritage. *I was very close to all of my cousins, my aunts, my uncle, my grandmother from my mother's side, so I know everyone on my mother's side; I do not know anyone else besides my father on my father's side.* Her mother's family was very close, having moved to New York after being separated by the murder of Valentina's grandfather. *And um, they tell funny stories of just, you know, New York City having these big buildings and all these*

lights, and just being overwhelmed. And that feeling of being overwhelmed just made them bond with each other. The one bedroom apartment where all six of them lived is where Valentina would live for the first thirteen years of her life.

As a child, Valentina wanted to be a lawyer, largely because of her older sister, who wanted to be one. *And so I kind of grew up learning and hearing about that and so I thought, "Of course I'm going to be a lawyer, too."* However, Valentina was a natural nurturer, and would play school with younger cousins and friends. *I would naturally like bring them together, and I think as a natu, as a nurturer I would come and pretend that I was either like a mommy or a teacher and I had the full like chalkboard and would teach them.* Throughout her childhood, Valentina developed the desire to protect people, as lawyers do, and nurture them, as a teacher would.

Academically, one of Valentina's first memories is from second grade. She always received excellent grades, but her teacher would send notes home to her mother that she was overly social. *And I remember still now, having a Marble notebook and at the very top the margin having little notes sent to my mother to say, "Valentina's a great student, she did great work. But she needs to work on self-control."* Her father's social nature was passed down to Valentina, but her mother had to deal with her teachers. *When she would pick me up from school, she would hide from the teacher's view, because she, she just couldn't take it anymore.* Despite her chattiness, Valentina was always an excellent student.

In fifth grade, Valentina encountered the first teacher who would have a large impact on her desire to be a teacher. Up until this point, all of Valentina's teachers had been White, while her school was very diverse. *I do remember in her class and maybe because she was the first African American teacher I had had, um, there was like a different kind of connection there.*

Valentina, who had been considered chatty by her white second grade teacher, began to be recognized as a star student. *And she was very um, transparent and very direct. Um, but I loved her. I loved that teacher and she loved us.* Valentina and other students would be treated to McDonald's for lunch for their success, and Valentina started to see how a teacher could form a real, lasting connection with students. *I think that relationship was the first relationship that probably, not the first, one of the first relationships where I thought, "Oh, I kind of like this teacher and maybe I would like teaching."* Of all of her teachers from elementary school to high school, her fifth-grade teacher had the biggest impact.

For high school, Valentina left Manhattan and went to high school in the Bronx. *I had to take a bus and a train and that was a huge deal for my mom, a huge deal for me.* At this point, her mother took a job as a high school custodian. Later on, it was her mother's experiences at school that would lead her to discourage Valentina from pursuing a career in education. *She saw them when they stay, when they got to work really early at 6:30 in the morning and left really late at 7 pm.* As a custodian, she saw all of the stresses on teachers, and did not want that for her daughter.

In high school, Valentina discovered that she was talented in Math, and her college path began to solidify. When she met with the high school counselor, she was pushed towards a career in business. *It was, you know, you can be an accountant or you can go into business in this way or that way or this way. Um, education wasn't, wasn't a path that was really discussed at least not in my high school.* So, after graduating from high school, she attended college in New York City and took accounting classes her entire freshman year.

In her first year of college, she received high marks in her accounting classes, but she was not interested. The idea of being an accountant failed to satisfy her need to protect and nurture

others. At the same time, her cousin was pursuing a degree in education at another university in New York. *So she just started talking to me a lot about what she was doing. And immediately I thought, "Well maybe I should be doing the same thing."* At the beginning of her sophomore year, Valentina made the switch and became an education major. *I thought, "Well, if this, if I am going to change anything, this is the time to do it." Um, and so I did. I, I transitioned to education sophomore year and loved it. Immediately loved it.* Valentina was now on a career track that ignited her passion for advocacy and the empowerment of others.

This decision was met with concern from her parents, however. *Yeah, so they influenced me almost away from the path.* Her mother's experiences as a custodian painted the profession in a poor light. Her father, whose dream was to be a journalist, hoped Valentina would pursue that career. Ultimately, they supported Valentina's decision, though. *At the same time I think he was, he thought "Well, you know, again, you're a nurturer, you um, love to support people." And, and honestly that's during that transitional time I also realized like, how much or, how um, important it was to advocate for others.* Valentina had a desire to help others, and being a teacher was her calling.

During her time in college, she worked with professors who instilled in her a work ethic necessary to impact students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Through her student teaching experience, she got to work with the exact types of students she wanted to help and learned from teachers who became role models for her. *And I think that ultimately of any of all those people, those were the kids that I taught and that I had experiences with, those were the people who really led me to like stay, to stick it through. To like stay in this work that's just so important.* As she finished up her undergraduate degree, those experiences laid the foundation of advocacy that remains a passion in Valentina's life.

Now, years later in Georgia, the lessons that Valentina learned about advocacy and nurturing play out in her daily life. She has become a role model to others, and uses the successes and opportunities she has had, both personal and professional, to help others. She does this not only to give back to the Latin community, but also so that her children will one day continue on the legacy of advocacy.

I think it's changed also, you know, since having kids. And I think like what I mentioned before in terms of, needing them to see that, "Oh mommy does this work for this reason, but also for our community." Is even much more important to me here because they don't see a lot of kids who, or I should say they do see kids who look like them, but they're not they're not immersed in the culture like I was growing up.

Currently, Valentina and her husband are involved in her children's school and give back to the Latinx community in Atlanta in a variety of ways. They live in a context much different from New York City. They live in a majority White neighborhood, and the majority of the Latin families in the community live in a different areas. *We're probably maybe 1 of 5 you know Latino families. And then right outside of the neighborhood, right outside of our little, like where our school is, there are a di, there are probably many more.* Valentina's children's school is diverse, but her friends tend not to be of Latin heritage. *It's still not the diversity that I grew up in. Which is hard sometimes. Um, I always tal, I always almost when I talk about that, it's always through the lens of, like my educator lens but also my parent lens.* Valentina finds herself having to be intentional about culture, something she didn't have to do because in New York, Latin culture was all around.

Because Valentina's children are growing up without the cultural experiences of living in New York City, she wants to make sure she and her husband instill in them a sense of heritage and identity. The struggles and successes of her mother, or "Ueli" as her children call her, need to be explicitly taught. The importance of this occurred to her when a new student was enrolled in her daughter's class.

One day she had come to me and said, "We have a new student in class and he doesn't speak English, mommy." And I said, "Uh, oh, we have a problem here. Because she's starting to form some ideas about this boy is different." And it's like, he may be different to these people, but he, "Let me tell you about Jose. You and Jose are very similar. You and Jose are the same people in many ways. And so what do we do with Jose? We embrace Jose. You know, we talk to Jose." Yeah, well, like you know there may be some things in terms of language. Um, some barriers, but, "You're going to be Jose's friend. Because Jose, just like you, comes from here, and you know where, you know, where Ueli came from and my dad came from, and they came from here too."

Valentina has become an advocate for Latin parents in her children's school. *I have to be the face because I know that if I am, pe, there will be more parents who approach me and say, "Oh, so tell me a little bit more about this." Um, and that's really important.* She serves on the principal's parent advisory board and volunteers to translate papers that are sent home.

In addition to being involved in her children's school, Valentina and her husband support Latinx families in other capacities. Her husband sits on the board of a foundation that supports Latinxs, and Valentina is on the board of another organization that helps Latinx families who suffer from domestic violence. *The work is really about rehabilitating the families who want to stay together.* Valentina also lends her educational expertise in this work. *So I've done a lot of*

work with them with um, just advocacy in, and how they can advocate for their kids. She and her husband stay engaged and help Latinx families in their community. In my work with them, in particular, I realize like, you know, I'm a Dominican Ecuadorian woman, what am I doing for my, like, Latinx like brothers and sisters?

Professional Experiences – I want kids to feel like they have power. They count. They matter.

Valentina's career in education started right after she graduated from college. She took an elementary school teaching position in East Harlem in New York City. Her principal was from Puerto Rico. In this environment, Valentina saw more diversity in her school's faculty than she had seen when she was a student in school. *And he hired a lot of Latinxs in his, in his faculty. Um, and his I'm trying to think of, even like neighboring schools, again, a lot were Latinx administrators.* This was consistent with the student population, which had Puerto Rican, African American, and Dominican students.

In this school, many students experienced a level of poverty that didn't exist in the community in which Valentina grew up. *I think in terms of um, like just economically they were more, that community was 100% much more impoverished that the community that I grew up in.* Most of her students were being raised by someone other than their parents, and many of the people living with her students struggled with addiction. *Um, it was just generational poverty that existed there.* Because the students had such inconsistent homelives, Valentina felt the responsibility to foster a sense of community within her classroom. *I needed to be in the classroom and be the advocate that they may not have had for whatever reason at home.* For Valentina, teaching in East Harlem was an opportunity to nurture and advocate for her students.

During her second year of teaching, Valentina was selected to participate in a pilot program with the Teachers' College out of Columbia University on the Reading and Writing

Units of Study programs. *And I remember thinking about, like, their philosophy and how like important literacy was. For example, reading and writing in particular. Um, how important it was for kids to be able to read about other people. Read about people who, who sounded and looked like them.* In her class, students wrote about their experiences and read about characters who had similar life experiences. In contrast to her own school experience, Valentina's students encountered teachers and curriculum that was more socially conscious and validated their experiences. Valentina saw the power of literacy, and it became ingrained in her educational philosophy.

After six years, Valentina, then twenty seven years old, and her husband decided to move to Atlanta. She had a serendipitous phone interview with an elementary school principal. Through the course of the conversation, Valentina and the principal discovered that they were both of Dominican descent, had lived in the same borough in New York, and the principal taught in the same elementary school where Valentina attended. *We talked over the phone and literally had goosebumps as we were talking about just our history and how connected it was.* After a follow up face to face interview, Valentina was hired to be a first grade teacher in the suburban Atlanta elementary school.

However, a few days after she was offered the job, her principal called her. The principal had accepted a job as an assistant superintendent in a county about an hour outside of Atlanta. *I thought this was definitely a sign that we were supposed to work together. And it was going to make the transition, um, an easier one for me.* Even though they never ended up working together, this principal became a mentor for Valentina, and she learned about effective school leadership from the legacy that she left. She continually heard stories about how the previous

principal would connect with the school community, or how she would do whatever it took to put students first.

She found that the teaching staff at her new school wasn't nearly as diverse as the one in New York, and she was the only Latinx teacher. Over the course of her four years at this school, Valentina taught first grade, fourth grade, and then taught literacy in the Early Intervention Program. Because she spoke Spanish, she also was asked to translate for parent meetings, even during instructional time. *I would have my um, my thing go off, buzzer go off, um, to come and translate for someone. You know? And even though we had people who would do that, they needed someone right, you know, right at that moment to do, to translate.* Valentina started to see the lack of support for Latin families, but she also saw the importance of her presence. *And I remember thinking how much of, how um, much of a difference or how, maybe it almost a surprise when I would get kids who were Hispanic kids that would come into my class and I could see it in their eyes and it's like, "Oh! I'm, this person is like me."* She used her role as a teacher to be an advocate for her students and their families.

It was also at this school that Valentina saw an ignorance about the Latin community that she hadn't encountered in New York City.

I mean when I first moved down here it was like, "Are you Mexican?" Like, that was what I was asked. "Are you Mexican?" And I realized that people were not just saying that because I am Hispanic but because they didn't know anything other than Mexico. And so that wa, those were interesting conversations I had with colleagues as a teacher that I would say, "Do you know that there are other countries? Latin American countries? So let me show you where I am." And a lot of people would know the Dominican Republic because they would vacation there. And so, and others who may not

have known what that was, I would literally have to point it out on a map and say “this is what it. This is where, where my mother is from. Or my family is from.” And with Ecuador, forget it. Like, no one knew where Ecuador was. Um, so you know, say Dominican Republic, “Oh, the D.R.!” “Yes, the D.R. That’s where my, my mom is from. And not where the resorts are.”

After her fourth year of teaching at this school, Valentina and her husband decided to move back to New York because of the birth of her daughter and a desire to be close to family. During her two years back in New York, Valentina assumed her first leadership role. She worked in schools in all five boroughs of New York City, and assisted principals with professional development and strategic planning around literacy. *I did a lot of that work with the teachers. And would come back to the principal and kind of, you know, revise our plans. Evaluate what was working, what was not working. And then create a new plan to continue to support those teachers.* In many ways, this role prepared her for the role she has today.

After two years, Valentina and her husband decided to move back to Atlanta. She stayed home with her newborn son for a short time before receiving a phone call about a local school leadership position as a Curriculum Support Teacher (CST). She took the job, and immediately saw the impact that a Latinx administrator can have in a school. In her year in the role, she had a major impact on the inclusion of Latinx families in the school.

I remember the parent liaison was so sad that I left and she goes, Um, “I don’t think you understand how just you being here and the parents and the kids, like, seeing someone that looks like them, how much of an impact you’ve made in the year that you’ve been here. Like, we’ve had more parents come in. We’ve had more parents ask questions. We

may have, because you're here and you can answer those questions and they know, you know, that they can talk to you about certain things."

After a year in that role, she received a call from the area superintendent of her school, asking her to apply for the Humanities Program Specialist role that she currently has. In much the same way that she supported schools in New York City, Valentina was tasked with delivering professional development and helping principals plan and implement humanities based curriculum. She is particularly passionate about working with schools whose students have diverse backgrounds. *But, I think I almost owe it to those kids to be that voice, right?* She sees her current role as a way to advocate for students and promote educational equity.

This is important work, as she has seen how teacher mindsets about students based on their backgrounds still persist. She has had to address staff members who refer to students as "apartment kids." Having grown up in an apartment herself, this is a term to which she takes particular offense. *"We don't call them apartment kids." You know. "What does that mean? You mean the kids in our school? The kids, you know, the kids who speak a different language? The kids whose, you know, English is a second language for them. Like, we don't, we don't put this label on them."* After twelve years in Atlanta, she continues to see negative mindsets about students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and she views her role as a way to advocate for those students and their families.

As far as the curricular work of her job, she is passionate about the Units of Study work that she was introduced to as a second-year teacher. *I think that, when I think about my experiences early on, I think that it shaped you know, what my purpose was in, in the teaching in the program specialist position.* Promoting reading and writing to give students voice and power is what gives Valentina the most satisfaction in her job. *Um, and the more they can read up on*

things and be able to share those things with others, um, with others, the more I feel like, you know, we're providing them the tools and the time to advocate for themselves and others.

Fostering advocacy through the written word brings together Valentina's passions of literacy and empowering students.

Valentina's next professional plan is to start a private consulting business that helps students, families, teachers, and administrators create a culture of literacy at home and in school. Her mission is to provide the strategies and tools necessary so that students can advocate for themselves through literacy. *Kids matter and should know that they matter.* As a parent and an educator, Valentina does not always see this happen, and starting her own consulting business will allow her to expand her sphere of influence outside of her current scope of schools.

Leadership

Valentina's leadership style combines Social Justice Leadership with Instructional Leadership. Her desire to create better opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds drives her. *I want to be known as someone who gave back time and resources um, because overall I feel like this stuff is going to get our kids not just reading and writing but advocating for themselves and for others.* She firmly believes that solid literacy instruction will allow for better opportunities for students, and she views her leadership role as a way to provide families and educators with strategies to create cultures of literacy. *The more they can read up on things and be able to share those things with others, um, with others, the more I feel like, you know, we're providing them the tools and the time to advocate for themselves and others.*

As Valentina spoke, I came to the realization that the majority of her principals and superintendents in her career have been people of color. Her first principal in Harlem is Latinx, the principal who hired her in Atlanta is Dominican, the principal who hired her as a CST is

African American, the area superintendent who hired her in her current role is Latinx, and her current area superintendent is African American. She is influenced by leaders who have an awareness of the needs of students of color, and she uses her platform to advocate for them.

Influential Figures

When I asked Valentina to identify influential people in both her professional and personal life, she gave me a wide range of people, from her sister, who first planted the seed to be an advocate for others, to her husband, who supports her in her career and her desire to start a consulting business. However, throughout our time together, three individuals came up over and over again: her father, her mother, and the Dominican principal who hired her.

Father - Valentina's father was described by her mother as a "walking encyclopedia." His thirst for knowledge and his desire to share that knowledge manifested in a loquacious disposition. *My talking habits definitely come from him.* His desire for Valentina to become a journalist stemmed from his own interests, and Valentina's focus on advocacy and the power of the written word fulfill her father's desire through an educational lens. He was a self-made man and an entrepreneur, which Valentina's career path reflects. She took a risk on a career in education and established herself as an exemplary teacher and leader from an early stage. She also has started her own business, just like her father started his electronics shop in the South Bronx.

Mother - Valentina's mother was also had a large influence on her. Her sacrifice and struggle as a young woman demonstrated strength and resiliency to her daughter. Additionally, she imparted the Dominican culture on Valentina, which gave her a firm foundation of her heritage, something she intentionally passes on to her own children. Her mother was also an

active part of Valentina's childhood and education, working hours at a factory that would allow her to be there for Valentina at home and help her with homework.

Dominican Principal - The third figure that had, and has, a large influence on Valentina is the Dominican principal who hired her. Although she never worked under her, she serves as a mentor for Valentina. *I talk to her every couple of months. Um, even though again she had nev, she and I had never worked together.* She has even offered Valentina jobs on two separate occasions, but Valentina has turned down the offers because they were in a more rural county. *My husband said, "No, we're not moving." He said, "We're not moving further out. No, that's not happening."* Valentina sees her as a role model both in her personal and professional life.

She's a mom, she's a wife, and you know, they know, like, her son and her husband, they know this is, this her. This is who she is. She's this nurturer. She's this person whose advocating for others. Um, and the advice that she always has given me is about that. Keep it about the kids.

Poetry Reflection

Below is Valentina's response to the poem *América* by Richard Blanco (1998). I have included her personal reflections in their entirety to let her tell her story.

While Blanco's experiences are not exact to mine, I can certainly connect to his story of two cultures clashing. My family immigrated to the United States in 1968 and made the difficult transition to make America their home. Living in a one-bedroom apartment in New York City, my grandmother and her six children did not have the time nor finances to dawdle, they needed to act fast and therefore quickly developed a plan where the kids enrolled in school while the matriarch took to cleaning homes as her way of making a living. It is of this first year of engaging with "Americans" and the overwhelming experience of living in a city like New York

that many stories are often told. My mother jokingly recounts how scared she was of the tall the buildings in the city and the excessive amount of people walking its streets. “Everyone looked and sounded different and were coming at us in different directions!” She tells of the language barriers and how she often confused words that, to her, sounded the same: “chicken” for “kitchen.” She shares stories of how painfully cold it was and the need to add outerwear and layering to her new American wardrobe. My aunts and uncles also tell stories of school and how exciting of an experience it was making friends, learning new content, and just simply taking public transportation to and from school. Nevertheless, the cultural change was difficult and resulted in all 6 siblings acquiring their GED – an option that was not only available to them but ideal for immigrants who needed to join the work force quickly in order to contribute to their households.

Of all narratives, however, the ones that reveal the trials and tribulations of living in a packed apartment with siblings that months before were spread amongst family members are symbolic of who my family was when they first arrived and who they are until this day – united. Those stories describe how each sibling got to know the other, adjusting to different personalities and habits and for the first time in many years, coexisting and deciding to come together as one. Stories of my four aunts collaborating to lock their younger brother in the closet just to get some privacy, of the gang sharing the chore load so that my grandmother would allow them to meet up with friends after school, of some siblings partnering up and committing to saving money to buy and share the latest American trends, and of all siblings being each other’s best friend when faced with the challenges of being an immigrant kid in “Nueva Yol”. Unlike Blanco’s family, mine never pictured returning to the Dominican Republic because while

adjusting to a new culture was complicated and messy, coming to America allowed them to be together and create a family unit they never had before. This is the family that I have always known – one that, more than anything, committed to working hard to stay together as one.

Like Blanco's family, mine comes together to celebrate birthday parties, Thanksgiving, and Christmas frequently and have also embedded parts of the American culture into their own. From the time I could remember, there has been a turkey featured on the Thanksgiving menu but right by the garnished bird is usually a pernil, or two, along with moro and ensalada de papa (my mom's dish). Dessert includes pies brought by the second generation of cousins which usually sits alongside my grandmother's postre – flan. Eating is always followed by singing and dancing to contemporary artists like Beyonce to artists that the first generation has eternally supported because their roots are also Dominican (Johnny Ventura and Fernandito Villalona). No matter who/what is playing, however, all generations partake in the merengue, salsa, and any another music or dance while my grandmother lovingly smiles at us, likely reminiscing of a time when we were sharing the dancefloor with her.

As a young girl, the celebrations often ended with the adults attempting to quietly carry their children off the vinyl-covered muebles that were always a little too noisy due to stiffness. Now, though, the conclusions of our gatherings are different. The kids are no longer my cousins, sister, and me but our children who try to entertain each other while their parents and grandparents sit on the same, old couch, though it is no longer covered in vinyl, listening to stories told by their great grandmother. The stories are mostly fond and funny, of times when her kids nearly killed each other in a one-bedroom apartment, of transitioning to America to give

them better opportunities, and, if she is in the mood, of bombas where she shares scandalous bochinche that explains the oddities of neighbors or friends. We all laugh at these stories and often ask to hear more in our Spanish, English, or Spanglish – it depends who is doing the asking.

Growing families and relocations have made it difficult to bring everyone together as often as when I was a kid, but we all do our best to keep the family united and to preserve the blended culture the first generation created for us. Living in New York, I had access to Dominican culture all around me – from hearing merengue at every bodega, having the option of buying pastelitos or a frio frio at every corner to talking in Spanish to almost everyone I encountered. In Georgia, it is different. I don't readily have access to platanos when I am in the mood to eat a mangu, a bodega, or even a Spanish-speaking person! Partaking in the blended culture is a conscious decision and takes effort. I cannot simply count on my community to engage in the Dominican-American culture, I have to plan for it. I have to plan a gathering of my Dominican friends, plan to drive to a supermarket that sells ethnic foods, deliberately speak Spanish, and create playlists of Dominican artists to engage in this culture. It is tricky but important and not just for me, but for my own family.

My kids are 9 and 6 and are being raised in a place that doesn't embody the Dominican-American culture. They are surrounded by people who do not look like them, speak Spanish, or truly understand their culture. As a result, my husband and I have made it our duty to immerse them in what we grew up with and in with the support of some of our friends because we cannot do it alone. We often plan gatherings with friends who are from the Caribbean, play music

from artists from the Dominican Republic, and have Spanish-only mornings. We hang our Dominican flag proudly in their playroom, teach them how to salsa, and participate in as many Latinx-based organizations and events as we possibly can. It is certainly a different experience even with these opportunities, but we are committed to maintaining as much of our culture as possible.

The same goes for me. I have been in education for about 18 years and have primarily worked in Title 1 schools serving mostly Hispanic and Black students. In all positions but one, I have been hired by a Latinx administrator that I have admired, and, in all school-based and district-based positions, I have worked alongside Latinxs serving some of our most disadvantaged communities. In my current work, as Program Specialist, I feel the most fulfilled when I have worked with school leaders and teachers who impact students who need the most support – students who often remind me of myself and of the kids I have taught. Even with my consulting, I aim to work with schools who have a higher percentage of Hispanic students that need access to instruction, resources, and time that will give them the tools to not only achieve in school but lead in their communities and world. I do not think this is a coincidence. I think that I gravitate to these communities because it gives me the opportunity to come face to face with and engage in my blended culture. It gives me the chance to see kids just like me who needed opportunities from someone who understood that success did not equate changing who you are or where you came from but being true to yourself. The sense of being authentic is what creating meaning thus success. And so, it is when I am doing my work within these communities that I am my most authentic self and that I feel the most successful. It is where I belong and where I intend to stay.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Exploring the lives of these four Latinx leaders in Georgia has addressed the question, “What are the lived experiences of four Latinx school leaders in Georgia?” The four portraits that were painted from my research revealed some commonalities and distinctions in their stories. Over the course of many hours, trust was built, and stories of struggle and resilience were shared. It is my hope that the experiences of these four individuals can create a better awareness of the experiences of Latinx educational leaders in Georgia in order to improve outcomes for all Latinx individuals in the educational system.

The themes that emerged from these four leaders are as follows: (a) support of family (b) assimilation (c) experiences of prejudice and racism (d) giving back to the community and (e) ESOL and foundational literacy.

To represent these five themes, and the experiences that emerged from them, I settled on work *I Dreamed I Could Fly* by Carlos Almaraz (1986) (see Figure 1). In the painting, the many forms make up the greater picture of the essence of the artist. Art brings to light that which is not readily seen, and the imagery of the piece coincides with Eisner’s belief that through art, the unseen becomes visible (Eisner, 2002). Each image contributes to the greater whole. Instead of selecting a portrait, which would show an individual’s face, this piece shows how a larger landscape of experiences is constructed by unique, individual symbolism.



Figure 1. I Dreamed I Could Fly by Carlos Almaraz (1986)

This piece integrates the variety of experiences of the artist within the context of being Latin American, of Mexican descent living in the United States. All the individual experiences and images blend together to form themes, and those themes blend together to create the essence of lived experiences. In this piece, images are portrayed that are present from the retelling of experiences of the participants. The imagery and vibrant colors evoke the emotion and images that emerged in the portraits: the coyotes from Rafael's journey across the border, the plane that brought Maria to the United States, the rows of desks from Eugenia's college, and the presence of a mentor with a similar background in Valentina's life. Each experience can be appreciated

for its contribution to the artwork, and the sum total of the pieces can be appreciated as one. Without any one of these experiences, themes, or participants, the piece would be incomplete.

In the following sections, the major themes are discussed, as well as implications and recommendations that accompany the themes.

Support of Family

The theme of the support of family members ran through all of the portraits. All of the participants' families serve as support networks and have provided inspiration to accomplish goals and give back to the community. For example, Rafael's mother, who returned to Mexico for her young son, is the motivating force behind his desire to succeed academically and professionally. Maria's mother, who worked long hours and made sure to attend parent teacher conferences even though she didn't speak English at the time, made Maria want to help out parents of her students in similar circumstances. The importance of family is also seen through Eugenia's parents' and grandparents' influence on her, as well as the large support network of Valentina's extended family.

Family is a vital piece of Latin culture, and the participants all talked about how the relationships with mothers, fathers, uncles, siblings, and cousins helped them succeed. Their success was not an individual effort, but an accomplishment built on the foundations laid by others. For example, Rafael attributes his success in football to his uncle, who encouraged him to step away from the television and play soccer with him outside. Valentina spoke about how her sister's career path as a lawyer instilled in her a desire to defend others. Eugenia's father's focus on giving back to the community continues to inspire her to serve students and families who are disadvantaged. Maria's mother's struggles as she supported her daughter's education brought tears to Maria's eyes.

Assimilation

All four individuals assimilated and adapted to American culture while maintaining their ties to their heritage. They have also had to assimilate and find their places in their professional contexts in Georgia. Whether it was through holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas, or through other areas of life, each of the four found ways to navigate American society while staying true to their roots. In three out of the four stories, assimilation was a major theme, especially with African American culture in Georgia. Rafael learned at an early age that he had to fit in no matter who he was around so that he could succeed. In fact, Rafael's lexicon at times utilized constructs such as "I'ma" typically found in African American speech patterns. Eugenia encountered the hard reality that she needed to downplay her Latinx heritage in order to be effective in leading a majority African American school.

Experiences of Prejudice and Racism

All four participants encountered forms of prejudice and racism in Georgia. For Maria and Valentina, this was in stark contrast to their experiences in their native New York. Valentina described how people in her first school in Georgia assumed she was from Mexico, and were only familiar with the Dominican Republic as a vacation destination. Rafael recounted his high school teacher telling him not to speak "that language" to a Spanish speaking student, even though he was trying to help him understand the content.

Eugenia and Maria encountered difficulty being of both Latinx and African descent. They suffered rejection and racism when their identity didn't conform to contemporary African-American culture. Maria's attempt to explain her heritage to an African American coworker was dismissed with, "Girl, you're just black." It was also assumed that she was married to a Latinx husband because she has a Hispanic last name. Eugenia has been told outright racist comments

such as “Well, I think if you put ‘em all in a bucket, and dump them out, they all turn out eating tacos.” Both Maria and Eugenia stated that they had even more experiences like these that they did not share with me.

The experiences that they have had in Georgia reveal how some in the African American community are prejudiced against Afro-Latinx culture. Because of this, culturally, Maria and Eugenia have felt like outsiders. As Eugenia stated, “Like, it’s very deep seeded about either you’re black or you’re white. And if you’re black, or you present as black and you don’t honor that blackness, you are almost insulting it.” This has caused a crisis of identity for both Eugenia and Maria and fostered a sense of resentment towards the lack of acceptance of Afro-Latinx culture and heritage.

Giving Back to the Community

This is a theme that came through in all four portraits. For Rafael, one way he gave back was by volunteering in a park after school to help students with homework. For Valentina, she is an active member of her children’s’ school in order to promote more inclusion of Latinx parents. She also sits on the board of an organization that assists Latinx families in abusive homes. Maria would tutor students on the subway on her way home from work. Finally, Eugenia serves on community leadership development committees in her own community.

All four participants pointed to how their presence fostered a greater sense of inclusion and involvement with Latinx families. In Rafael’s current role, he sees himself as both assistant principal and parent liaison. Eugenia chose to lead a school with a large Latinx population in order to support the community. Valentina was told firsthand how her presence impacted parent participation and involvement in her school. Maria connected with Latin families at her schools and they looked to her to help them navigate the American school system. Because of their

presence, these leaders have opened doors and created pathways for parents of Latin students to be involved in the education of their children.

ESOL and Foundational Literacy

All four participants had a connection to language acquisition and literacy. Rafael and Maria both taught ESOL before moving into leadership positions as ESOL lead teachers at a local school and state level. Eugenia was primarily an ESOL teacher throughout her teaching career, and continues to impact English Language Learners through the teaching of ESOL certification classes. Valentina's current role supports humanities, and most of her time is dedicated to the implementation of literacy programs. Whether it was spurred by a desire to teach students that remind them of themselves or an understanding of the power of the written word, language and literacy is an important component in the professional experiences and identity of all four participants.

Implications and Recommendations

The richness and depth of the experiences of all four Latinx leaders are distinct, yet hold common themes that bind their stories together in the same portrait. Four individual portraits highlighting unique paths to school leadership are woven with the same thematic threads. Each of these individuals stands on the shoulders of others, and each understands deeply the depth of sacrifice that was made for them, and they do not consider this lightly. Instead of prideful boasts of accomplishment and personal gain, all four were quick to point out how the efforts of others paved the way for their success.

The stories that emerged in the interviews and reflections of the participants required a level of intimacy and trust that was not quickly reached. Each interview started off with safe topics, such as timelines of career paths and job descriptions. However, as all four participants

began to feel comfortable with me and understand the value of their experiences, they allowed me access to the depth of their experiences that is not readily shared. The stories of immigration, family struggles, and racism were not quickly shared. The relationships that were built over time between me and the participants fostered a level of trust that allowed for the most emotional and significant aspects of the individuals' experiences to emerge.

I was struck that three out of the four participants came from the northeast, and all three had ties to New York City. This made me realize that among the small number of Latinx school leaders we have in Georgia, a portion, and I presume a large portion, of them hail from somewhere outside of the state. That speaks to the small number of Latinx educators who have been produced by Georgia's schools, and also presents an opportunity to recruit from other parts of the country, particularly the Northeast.

That being said, more efforts should be made to promote the education profession to Latinx individuals currently living in Georgia. A pipeline of future teachers and school leaders should be cultivated from current Latinx high school students in Georgia through a career pathway for teaching. The effectiveness of such programs is evidenced in Rafael's portrait. He was first introduced to the profession of teaching during high school, and he continued on this career path once he went to college. Conversely, Valentina's experience in high school steered her away from the profession, as the focus from her high school counselor was on business. Creating pathways to teaching for Latinx students, as well as explaining the importance of more Latinx teachers in our schools, can create a larger pool of potential teachers entering colleges and universities.

Next, a strong mentoring network of Latinx school leaders should continue to be fostered in Georgia. Because there are so few, a support network is vital in the encouragement and career

consulting for aspiring leaders. I was surprised that Valentina was the only participant who had a Latinx mentor in Georgia who assisted her in her career path. While a professional organization is in place, its growth and effectiveness is important in the support of current and future leaders. Reaching out to current Latinx teachers with mentorship opportunities will help aspiring leaders avoid some of the challenges that have been encountered by those who have gone before them.

The most powerful discovery for me in these portraits was the experiences of prejudice and racism that Maria and Eugenia experienced as Afro-Latinx educators in Georgia. It saddened me to hear how Latina heritage needs to be hidden in order to advance in the school system. Eugenia discussed how she has to present as African American in order to lead effectively in her current school. Maria doesn't hide her heritage, but has had to address ignorant comments from others. Eugenia was very clear in the depth of this problem, and Maria said she has had many instances more than what she brought up in which she has faced adversity from African Americans because of her heritage.

To me, this is a previously untold narrative. In my research, I theoretical approaches to identity and statistics concerning prejudice and racism towards Afro-Latinx individuals by African Americans, but I did not find testimonials of those who have experienced it. It was only when Maria and Eugenia independently described their experiences that this problem was brought to light. More than in the states in which they grew up, there appears to be a mentality with some members of the African American community in Georgia that Afro-Latinx culture is less than African American culture, and individuals of Afro-Latinx origin must deny their heritage and assimilate into the more prevalent culture. It is my hope that Maria and Eugenia's stories will spur others on to examine this issue more closely.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research exploring the lived experiences of other Latinx school leaders in Georgia would further add to the collective body of knowledge on this topic. More specifically, as previously stated, there is a gap in the literature examining the experiences of Afro-Latinx individuals in Georgia. More specifically, instances of prejudice and racism from African Americans towards Afro-Latinx people. An exhaustive database search into extant research revealed a dearth of literature addressing the instances of prejudice and racism towards Afro-Latinx individuals from African Americans. This is a topic yet to be explored in depth, and Maria and Eugenia indicated that their experiences are not isolated.

Another recommendation for future research would be to research the lived experiences of the superintendent who serves as Valentina's mentor. This study would be insightful, as this Latinx leader has served as a school leader in Georgia longer than any of the four participants in this study. This would provide more context to how, if at all, the landscape for Latinx school leaders has changed in Georgia over the last few decades.

Finally, there is a need for a longitudinal study of current educator preparation programs in high schools, and their effectiveness with Latinx students in terms of course completion and entrance into the teaching profession. This is a topic specifically worthy of study in the state of Georgia, as the number of Latinx educators and leaders lags far behind Whites and African Americans. The study of these programs would provide a body of knowledge to support an increase in the number of Latinx high school students entering the field of education.

Concluding Thoughts

This study has been the culmination of three years of exploration and research into the importance of the inclusion and promotion of Latinx school leaders in Georgia. As a principal of

a school that has a majority of Latinx students, I see daily how a Latinx school leader could impact our students. Recently, we had a “dress as your role model” day at school, and Alex, a fifth grader, dressed as me. While he wore my trademark button down shirt and khakis, the similarities ended there. I couldn’t help but think of how much more powerful it would be if Alex had someone like Rafael, a Latinx who grew up in the same culture and overcame the same barriers that Alex may face.

These portraits honor the experiences of the four participants, but also the experiences of their parents and grandparents, who came to the contiguous United States in hopes that their future generations would receive a good education, be successful, and impact the community. All four of the individuals I had the honor of highlighting realized these dreams. The long hours working in factories, cleaning houses, and in restaurants resulted in greater opportunities for their children. The long days and little pay paid off tenfold. The sacrifice and commitment to education has manifested in four school leaders focused on impacting communities gripped by generational poverty and changing the trajectory of students’ lives.

I hold Rafael, Maria, Eugenia, and Valentina in the highest esteem. For them, work is not work. Work is a calling to help all children, and more specifically, children who remind them of themselves. I am amazed at the power of their stories. They discuss overcoming adversity and honoring their families with a sense of duty and respect that can be lost in an ever-increasing individualistic society. So, I thank them. I thank them for sharing their stories, for laying bare a large piece of themselves. It is my great desire that through these words, I have been able to give honor to the experiences they shared with me, and inspire more experiences to come.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

América

By Richard Blanco (1998)

I.

Although Tía Miriam boasted she discovered
at least half-a-dozen uses for peanut butter—
topping for guava shells in syrup,
butter substitute for Cuban toast,
hair conditioner and relaxer—
Mamá never knew what to make
of the monthly five-pound jars
handed out by the immigration department
until my friend, Jeff, mentioned jelly.

II.

There was always pork though,
for every birthday and wedding,
whole ones on Christmas and New Year's Eves,
even on Thanksgiving Day—pork,
fried, broiled or crispy skin roasted—
as well as cauldrons of black beans,
fried plantain chips and yuca con mojito.
These items required a special visit
to Antonio's Mercado on the corner of 8th street
where men in guayaberas stood in senate
blaming Kennedy for everything—"Ese hijo de puta!"
the bile of Cuban coffee and cigar residue
filling the creases of their wrinkled lips;
clinging to one another's lies of lost wealth,
ashamed and empty as hollow trees.

III.

By seven I had grown suspicious—we were still here.
Overheard conversations about returning
had grown wistful and less frequent.
I spoke English; my parents didn't.

We didn't live in a two story house
 with a maid or a wood panel station wagon
 nor vacation camping in Colorado.
 None of the girls had hair of gold;
 none of my brothers or cousins
 were named Greg, Peter, or Marsha;
 we were not the Brady Bunch.
 None of the black and white characters
 on Donna Reed or on Dick Van Dyke Show
 were named Guadalupe, Lázaro, or Mercedes.
 Patty Duke's family wasn't like us either—
 they didn't have pork on Thanksgiving,
 they ate turkey with cranberry sauce;
 they didn't have yuca, they had yams
 like the dittos of Pilgrims I colored in class.

IV.

A week before Thanksgiving
 I explained to my abuelita
 about the Indians and the Mayflower,
 how Lincoln set the slaves free;
 I explained to my parents about
 the purple mountain's majesty,
 "one if by land, two if by sea"
 the cherry tree, the tea party,
 the amber waves of grain,
 the "masses yearning to be free"
 liberty and justice for all, until
 finally they agreed:
 this Thanksgiving we would have turkey,
 as well as pork.

V.

Abuelita prepared the poor fowl
 as if committing an act of treason,
 faking her enthusiasm for my sake.
 Mamà set a frozen pumpkin pie in the oven
 and prepared candied yams following instructions
 I translated from the marshmallow bag.
 The table was arrayed with gladiolus,
 the plattered turkey loomed at the center
 on plastic silver from Woolworths.
 Everyone sat in green velvet chairs

we had upholstered with clear vinyl,
except Tío Carlos and Toti, seated
in the folding chairs from the Salvation Army.
I uttered a bilingual blessing
and the turkey was passed around
like a game of Russian Roulette.
“DRY”, Tío Berto complained, and proceeded
to drown the lean slices with pork fat drippings
and cranberry jelly—“esa mierda roja,” he called it.
Faces fell when Mamá presented her ochre pie—
pumpkin was a home remedy for ulcers, not a dessert.
Tía María made three rounds of Cuban coffee
then abuelo and Pepe cleared the living room furniture,
put on a Celia Cruz LP and the entire family
began to merengue over the linoleum of our apartment,
sweating rum and coffee until they remembered—
it was 1970 and 46 degrees—
in América.
After repositioning the furniture,
an appropriate darkness filled the room.
Tío Berto was the last to leave.

Appendix B

Poetry Reflection Questions

Adapted From Intrator & Scribner (2014, p. 204)

Write a brief commentary that describes your personal relationship with and connection to the poem. Your commentary should not be an explication, but a personal narrative that describes how this poem touched you and how it helps you make sense of your life and work as an educator.

- How do the events, feelings, and words of the characters in the poem connect to events in your past?
- In what ways are the events, feelings, and words of the characters in the poem different from events in your past?
- What about this poem is meaningful to you? How does the poem speak to your work or your life?
- What do you notice or what has stood out to you from this poem?
- How does this poem help you clarify or explain what is important?
- Any other thoughts?

Appendix C

The semi-structured interview questions were as follows:

Professional and Professional Experiences:

1. Describe your current role
2. Describe your career path.
3. Describe your professional environment (district, town, school, office).
4. Please discuss your heritage and its impact on your career.
5. How is your heritage evident in your life outside of work?
6. Describe your experiences growing up.
7. How have your experiences informed your practice as a school administrator?
8. Describe the individuals who have had a lasting impact on your personal life.
9. Describe the individuals who have had a lasting impact on your professional life.
10. Has your heritage had an impact on your professional life? If so, how?