Latinas in Education and Leadership
My Journey from Student to Empowerment and Leadership

Carmela Ochoa
Moraine Valley Community College, Palos Hills, IL, USA

[Abstract] This article explores the experiences of Latinas' journey in education as a student and professional educator. From my examined personal experiences, I implemented leadership strategies to support Latina students who attend High School Equivalency and English as Second Language courses. This article explores the unique family constraints and addresses the need for identifying and overcoming cultural expectations and behaviors critical for the success of Latinas in Education. College personnel who may not be cognizant of the intricacies of the culture, cannot create an inclusive or equitable learning environment. Faced with an unwelcoming administration, students are hesitant to continue their education. I co-designed and established an educational support group to guide Latina students in developing skills for personal and academic growth to achieve their goals.

[Keywords] Latina students, cultural constraints, leadership development, student empowerment

Reflection

My leadership skills have been shaped by my culture, life experiences, and education. Reflecting on those opportunities provided me with great strength, powerful insight, and much-needed personal growth. In having dealt with adversity as a Hispanic woman and single mother, I found myself having to react in ways that were not very positive or assertive. I was either very angry or I could not stand up for myself. Fortunately, I met many people on my journey who believed in my abilities. More importantly, I had to learn to believe in myself. I knew that pursuing an education was the path that would lead to a brighter future. At the time, I was not aware of the personal and cultural barriers that would affect my journey.

Familism

One barrier to Latina growth is familism, as described by Campos (2014) as

…a strong identification with and attachment to nuclear and extended family … Familism consists of social norms, personal attitudes, and behaviors …but is typically measured through self-report scales that reflect the extent to which an individual endorses its central components: (a) a sense of obligation to family, (b) regarding family as a first source of emotional support, (c) valuing interconnectedness among family members, (d) taking family into account when making important decisions, (e) managing behavior to maintain family honor, and (f) willingly subordinating individual preferences for the benefit of family… Currently, familism is considered one of several family-related constructs that are prevalent in collectivist cultures that value prioritizing family over self … (p. 191)

A Latina's sense of family responsibility is instilled at a young age by the cultural expectations of helping with household chores and taking care of siblings. In other words, a Latina's goals and dreams will not be acknowledged if they interfere with the family's interests.

This sense of family is not conducive to shaping a young girl's future as it limits them to becoming a wife and mother.

Cultural Role and Expectations

As a Hispanic daughter, my role at home centered on homemaking skills that would take care of a future husband and children. Mexican girls are raised to be passive and not talk back to their parents or brothers. "The gender stereotypes introduced in childhood are reinforced throughout our lives and become self-fulfilling prophecies." (Sandberg, 21) At the age of eighteen, I married and had two children within four years of marriage. After being married ten years, I divorced my husband and received sole custody of my children. Even though I was to receive child support, my ex-husband quit his job and never provided for his children. I refused to fall into the single mom stereotype that was depicted as living on welfare or having men subsidize my life. Life was very hard, there was bankruptcy, poverty, and not enough food to eat but I never wavered from doing it on my terms. After finding a full-time job close to home, I began the process to transform myself.

Gender Roles

Two factors that prevent women from becoming outspoken and independent are machismo and marianismo. "The meaning of Machismo is male supremacy, emphasizing the man of the house not only as a father but also as a provider and protector. The Machismo value may influence Latino men to fulfill the traditionally patriarchal role. (Gomez Cervantes, p. 24) Unfortunately, women are viewed as subordinates, put on earth to do the bidding of men. The unrealistic expectations are difficult to live up to and women are expected to endure abuse, cheating, and financial deprivation. Women rarely have a role outside of their home; family activities with extended family and friends or attending church may be their only sources of socialization. The role of Marianismo emphasizes girls being good daughters and, once married, women being good wives and mothers. This role defines women following the example of the Virgin Mary by self-sacrifice for her children" (Gomez Cervantes, p. 24). Women are expected to bear the family burdens but not have a voice to disagree or speak up for their best interests. Strong-willed girls are told to behave, to be quiet, or be punished. The mental and emotional toll can be damaging and leads to relationship complications throughout life. In the classroom, Latinas do not contribute to the discussions and only speak when they are called on. This explains why females have problems in pursuing an education or a career, they have not been allowed to advocate for themselves.

Educational Journey

In my 30s, I began pursuing an Associate Degree as I had been working at a community college. Tuition was free for employees, and I slowly began to accumulate credits to graduate. While taking classes, I was working in the Adult Basic Ed Department and felt a kinship with the adult students who were struggling with balancing family, work, and classes. This is how I discovered my passion for supporting adult learners. The more I spoke with students, I realized that the adult population was very different from the traditional students and unfortunately, invisible. At this point, I also became more aware of the Spanish GED students in our program, I assisted with class registrations and became their connection, they were able to voice their concerns about the program or seek out help. I noticed that there was not a system in place to specifically support them. After relaying the students' needs to the GED Coordinator, she did

not seem to be too concerned. I felt frustrated and angry since more could have been done for all students. "For many, the default way of defining racism and other forms of discrimination involves overt, intentional acts of individual meanness, exclusion, and unfair treatment" (Radd, p. 13). That type of behavior from an administrator deters students from seeking help and enrolling in classes.

Discrimination

The Chicano Movement in the 1960s highlighted the unfair treatment of Mexicans in the California school system as the excerpt describes, Schools in California were desegregated by the 1960s, but deep-rooted racism persisted. School was a difficult, painful experience for Mexican children, especially those who spoke little English. Anglo teachers often held Mexican students in low regard. Teachers, school administrators, and fellow students often treated Spanish-speaking children with contempt and poverty created further obstacles for Mexican immigrants (Chicano Movement, 2005). As Latinos settled into different areas of the United States-racism increased. Discrimination may not end but building the emotional capacity for Latinas to survive in hostile environments is important.

Education Leaders as Role Models

Latinas face a lack of role models to who they can relate as women of color. Successful Latinas who have achieved education and career goals often move on to corporations and universities to work in higher-paying positions. While females may have a supportive white instructor, they may not understand family dynamics or their experiences. "Latino/a students may lack not only resources that would best represent their culture in school but also mentors and role models who would encourage them to continue with their education" (Gomez Cervantes, p. 26.)

Patriarchy in Education

As Latinas pursue non-traditional careers, a patriarchal society still exists for women in school systems. The teachers interact differently with girls and boys in the classroom, giving boys the more challenging problems and identifying them as trouble-makers. This brings boys more attention from the teachers, in comparison to viewing girls as quiet and passive, resulting in girls not having the same opportunities to participate in class (Ballantine and Spade 2008; Kimmel 2008). Latinas face a harsh reality when aiming to obtain higher education and then a professional career resulting from an educational system that is not cooperative and encouraging…. (Gomez Cervantes, 2010, p. 32)

Latinas can be discouraged from attending classes based on their gender in non-traditional occupations. Women who are enrolled in welding or auto mechanics face, described by Patterson (2016) in the following way,

…feelings of isolation, and imposition of gender roles and expectations onto the students…Through several rounds of classroom observations, instructors and curricula established the content material as a "male domain," using masculine forms of communication and cultivating an environment of male dominance. The same study identifies that this curricula/instructional style contributed to female students' sense of isolation and feelings of being out-of-place. (p. 3).

While I was attending junior college, Hispanics were the largest minority on-campus, yet they were invisible. The administration did not take any steps to research how to retain or assist them with their education. The cultural climate was unwelcoming, in one of my classes, the

instructor stated that if immigrants are coming to this country, they should speak English only. While making that statement, he looked directly at me since I was the only person of color in the classroom. Actions such as these deter Hispanic students, especially those born to immigrant parents, from continuing their education. Most colleges want to be recognized as Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI),

Once they are certified it gives them eligibility to compete for grant programs set aside for HSIs, says Antonio R. Flores, President and CEO of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, known as HACU. Flores adds that those funds enable colleges to continue to recruit Hispanic students and to support them once on campus, guiding students to graduation day and setting alumni up for employment afterward" (Moody, 2020).

If a college is designated as HSI because they meet certain criteria, it should be providing more services and resources that the funding provides. Recruiting students is not the issue, it is retaining them that requires a more hands-on approach to understanding the many barriers that prevent them from dropping out of college.

Leadership Development

As an employee, I decided to apply for a new leadership initiative at the college and I was accepted. According to the Center for Teaching and Learning at Moraine Valley Community College the leadership academy is

…designed to build a skilled and diverse pool of academic and administrative employees with the knowledge and competencies to be successful in leadership roles at all levels of employment at Moraine Valley Community College. The Leadership Academy promotes and encourages leadership development activities to reinforce the philosophical concept that everyone is a leader regardless of position or job classification.

The academy touched upon many aspects of leadership, for example, I learned not to react with emotions but to listen patiently and to help others solve issues.

Throughout my undergrad, my mentor was the Dean of the department. Nina voiced her concern regarding my leadership skills. She explained that she saw quite a bit of her characteristics in my personality, she had changed to be more successful in her role. It is difficult for me to accept criticism even though it may be well-intentioned. At first, I was embarrassed since she seemed to be only acknowledging my negative traits which were introversion and working independently. Due to the constant demands on my time involving projects and deadlines, I tend to become very stressed, and I shut down to cope until my emotions are under control. Emotional intelligence requires that I am aware of how I express my emotions, through facial expressions and tone, regulating those emotions to positively impact my critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and applying those skills effectively when collaborating with others" (Shenaar-Golan, p.446). If I had not applied those techniques, I would have been very difficult to work with. I began to engage with my coworkers instead of staying in my office. I became more outgoing by presenting at conferences and networking. I asked for input on projects and relied on my coworkers for assistance in planning presentations. My work life became much easier and enjoyable after applying new leadership skills.

Nina also formed a leadership group where I and three of my coworkers would meet weekly to learn and apply our new skills. We read about theory and there was more collaboration among us as we worked on projects. Arriaga (2020) stated,

…successful women leaders who share their stories of overcoming barriers will change the job itself through collaborative practices and shift the conversation. Female leaders mentoring aspiring female leaders will help change perceptions of women as "less than men" and more as successful peer" (pp. 42-43).

I am appreciative of the skills that I learned over the past year. The support I received gave me the courage I needed to go beyond my comfort zone. I was appointed as a board member representing the adult education community for a national organization. Meeting others in my profession allows for the opportunity to inquire about their program and their initiatives.

In my current position as Coordinator, I can achieve my earlier goal of supporting adult learners. I am now able to create a better program, orientations, and support groups that will encourage students to continue their education. To help female Hispanic students, I have co-founded the Empowerment of Latina Leadership Alliance (ELLA) and its mission is to empower, strengthen, and unite women to be inspired, to connect in a safe place where creativity, learning, life experiences, can unite us to serve each other, our families, and our communities. I encourage the participants to have a voice, to state their needs, they want to be educated but encounter family members who want them either to get married or work to contribute to the household. The best example of how they can be successful is by sharing my story, my hardships and letting them know, they will survive. ELLA is vital to their personal growth and their future. The needs of students are constantly evolving, and it is my responsibility to find or develop the support and resources they need.

Implementing a Dream

The idea for creating a leadership group for Latinas stems from my personal experiences as a Latina and professionally in my capacity as an educator. My coworker Christian, who was a Spanish GED instructor, knew of the students' struggles in and out of the classroom. Since we both are Latinas but from different generations, we both expressed a desire to make a difference. We work as a team to determine the meeting schedule and topics that the students have expressed an interest in. We naturally fall into team leadership which is "…acknowledging that multiple individuals may shift in and out of leadership roles as a team works toward goal achievement" (Dugan, 2017, p. 162). We realize that we both have different abilities and outlooks yet have equal input. "Coworkers who support one another and achieve together can be an antidote to service burnout. Working with others should be rejuvenating, inspirational, and fun." (Kouzes, 2019, p. 130). Fortunately, we work well together and are happy to continue working with students.

The purpose of the group is to meld the positive aspects of their cultural background with skills that will propel them into personal, academic, and career fulfillment. The need for a mentor, ideally with someone from the same cultural background with whom girls can identify, is vital to their emotional health. Mentors can facilitate the discussions; each participant can share their concerns and collectively examine areas that are preventing their advancement. This type of activity relieves the facilitator as the main source of information and guidance and shifts the power to the participants. It also increases their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. "Shared leadership in turn influences and is influenced by the achievements of leadership outcomes (i.e., increased group satisfaction, performance, and effectiveness…" (Dugan, 2017, p. 171). In participating in discussions, the students will learn to trust the process and continue to thrive in a non-judgmental environment

Conclusion

The formation of this group has been a challenge. Many were leery of its purpose or were not willing to take the time to participate. They were hesitant to share stories as they did not trust others or were afraid of someone knowing about personal family issues. It is emphasized that discussions are private and that to be effective, the group requires everyone to contribute, share, and be compassionate. "…adaptive change stimulates resistance because…it asks…to take a loss, experience uncertainty and even express disloyalty to people and cultures." (Dugan, 2017, p. 266) For this group to be successful, it requires that the role of mentors requires disclosing their challenges and stories, being open and vulnerable. Overall, the ELLA group is on its way to becoming an anchor for Latina students. The group meets once a month to discuss a range of topics from personal, educational, and careers. Their leadership skills are improving, and they have become more open to trusting their peers and mentors. They now have a sense of belonging on campus and feel part of the college community. Latinas are a special group of women who are very loyal and caring. It is important to encourage, support, listen, and act when they confide their fears, sorrows, or joy. Once you have earned their trust, you have made a friend for life. Although we have a small group, I am confident that Christian and I made the right decision to become their mentors. As time goes on there will be more Latinas who will achieve their dreams and believe in themselves, and they will raise their daughters to do the same.

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