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The Enactment of Anti-Deficit Thinking by Latina/o/x School Leaders

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to consider how Latina/o/x school leaders enacted anti-deficit thinking regarding Latina/o/x students and families in particular. *Testimonios* collected from eight Latina/o/x school leaders were analyzed through the theoretical lens of LatCrit to understand how anti-deficit thinking was enacted. Data analysis revealed that anti-deficit thinking was enacted through leaders' a) upholding of high expectations; b) embracing *Latinidad* which informed social justice advocacy; c) promoting bilingualism; and d) engaging parents and families equitably. Findings contribute to increased understanding of Latino Educational Leadership and the operationalization of anti-deficit thinking by school leaders.

KEYWORDS

Anti-deficit thinking; Latina/o/x school administrators; educational leadership; community cultural wealth; Latino Educational Leadership

Schools in the U.S. do not equitably educate Latina/o/x students. For example, in 2020, the high school dropout rate for Latina/o/x students (7.4%) was higher than students who identify as two or more races (6.5%), White (4.8%), Black (4.2%), Asian (2.4%) students, and the overall dropout rate (5.3%) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Further, 2019–2020 graduation data reveal 83% of Latina/o/x students who attended public high schools graduated within 4 years of starting ninth grade, compared to 93% of Asian/Pacific Islander students, 90% of White students, 81% of Black students, and 75% of American Indian/Alaska Native students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

Some educators may explain these inequities based on deficit thinking, which places the blame for poor academic achievement upon those who underperform, due to perceived inherent cultural deficiencies (Patton & Museus, 2019; Valencia, 2010). This approach is harmful to students because it undermines equity-based approaches for learning and engagement, supports educators' beliefs that schools and therefore, they, are not the problem and do not need to engage in institutional reforms (Nelson & Guerra, 2014), and neglects to leverage cultural and familial strengths to inform culturally responsive schooling. The articulation of deficit thinking among educators who perceive themselves or are perceived by others as caring and committed to student success, reflects the pervasiveness of deficit thinking in society at large and within institutions such as schools. In other words, "schools and teachers mirror these beliefs" (García & Guerra, 2004, p. 154). However, the recognition of this way of thinking among societal institutions does not and should not alleviate individual responsibility to acknowledge and prevent one's contributions to such harmful thinking and outcomes.

Another approach to analyzing inequality is grounded in asset-based, or anti-deficit thinking, which, due to unearthing and centering the strengths of underserved students and families, points one to consider the ways in which institutions contribute to inequities. At the root of this analysis, is the belief that all students and families can achieve high standards that reflect their cultural values, when

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provided adequate resources. Therefore, asset-based efforts focus on ameliorating institutional barriers to the success of Latina/o/x students (Hayes et al., 2015). For example, English-only instructional practices devalue Spanish speakers, privilege English speakers, and often lead to segregated classrooms, based on the erroneous assumption that children who are not fluent in English are not capable of rigorous curriculum (Gándara & Aldana, 2014).

Given the critical need to create educational opportunities that center the lived experiences of Latina/o/x families, the ways in which anti-deficit thinking is cultivated and operationalized are important to understand so that it can be enacted more widely. Additionally, Latina/o/x leaders are important for Latino student achievement. Increasingly, scholars and practitioners in *p*-12 institutions recognize the strengths of Latina/o/x administrators, which enhances equity and achievement generally, and for Latina/o/x students in particular (Hernandez et al., 2014; Martinez & Méndez-Morse, 2021; Rodela & Rodriguez-Mojica, 2019).

Through our larger study of eight Latina/o/x school leaders (Lowery & Romero-Johnson, 2023), we became interested in their enactment of anti-deficit thinking. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to consider: How did Latina/o/x school leaders enact anti-deficit thinking regarding Latina/o/x students and families?

Before we continue, we explain our choice of ethnoracial labels. People who identify broadly as of Latino descent may refer to themselves by many different terms, including Hispanic, Latino, Latina, Latinx, or by their national heritage, such as Puerto Rican. Tobar (2023) pointed out that those terms are used to describe ethnicity or "common cultural background," yet "the rest of the country treats us [Latinos] as a 'race'" (p. 8) with its associated oppressive caste ideologies. The use of an "x" in "Latinx" denotes a shift away from the term "Latino" which "symbolized a highly gendered, male, and thus non-inclusive vision of Latinidad." Yet, "Latinx" is not accepted by those who contend it is inappropriate to use non-gendered language in a language that is gendered, and many Latinos in California use the terms Latinx and Latina/o interchangeably (Mora et al., 2022, p. 1171).

Relatedly, there is no consensus about whether the term *Latinidad* is empowering or oppressive. It is considered unifying by some, including the participants in this study, yet others caution against using the term because it conflates ethnicity, race, and nationality, which impedes efforts to address issues of power, discrimination, invisibility, and colonization of particular groups, including indigenous peoples (Kovats Sánchez, 2021). To add to this complexity, Burgos and Arango (2022) argued that Latinidad is a "social affordance" which replaces Latinidad "as a race, as an ethnicity, or as an ethnorace as the *primary descriptor* of the group" because the "multidimensionality of Latinidad overflows those extant categories." Rather than arguing that race and ethnicity "are *unnecessary* or *useless* for understanding Latinidad," they asserted "no combination of them is *sufficient*." They concluded, "Latinidad is anchored in the things that Latinxs do because of our Latinidad, as well as those things that others do to us, with us, and upon us because of our Latinidad" (p. 2, italics original). Given these diverse perspectives, we use Latina/o/x as the most inclusive of preferred terms. Other terms used reflect the choices of the researchers we cited and the preferences of our participants. We refer to *Latinidad* to represent our participants' acknowledgment of and appreciation of the diversity and unifying similarities within and across Latina/o/x groups.

Next, to draw a connection between Latina/o/x school leaders' experiences, practices, and anti-deficit thinking, we contextualize deficit thinking vis-à-vis critical race theory and LatCrit. Then, we explain how culturally responsive school leadership and applied critical leadership, which are forms of social justice leadership, are incorporated into Latino Educational Leadership, all which incorporate anti-deficit thinking.

Review of literature

Deficit thinking in education rests on the belief "that the student who fails in school does so because of his/her internal deficits or deficiencies" (Valencia, 2010, pp. 6–7). Deficit thinking is rooted in cultural deprivation theory, which pathologizes, or identifies cultural inadequacies such as delinquent

behavior, low expectations, and lack of motivation as the root of the problem for historically marginalized people (Dudley-Marling, 2007; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004).

The pathologizing of people of color and poor families is often based on assumptions about how they ought to interact in schools based on norms of the dominant group (Nelson & Guerra, 2014), which is historically White and middle class. For example, Alemán (2009) unpacked the deficit beliefs spoken by a government official who compared students in majority White schools who grow up with "a lot of exposure to vocabulary and reading," to students in majority Latina/o schools who "don't have much exposure to vocabulary" before school. The official assumed that students who attend predominantly Latina/o schools are less skilled and had less vocabulary when they enter school. Those underlying assumptions were "indicative of wider attempts to assign blame to those with less institutional power and to devalue the cultural and community assets that are present in communities of color" (p. 295). Assumptions and blame reinforce the belief that the underperformance of certain groups cannot be overcome by educators (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Nelson & Guerra, 2014).

Deficit thinking enacted by school leaders reproduces inequitable outcomes on traditional measures such as tests or graduation rates. Educators who have low expectations for students they deem incapable (e.g. students of color, in poverty, identified as having a disability, or speak a primary home language other than English) often limit those students' access to rigorous learning by tracking them in low-level courses or segregating them based on perceived ability. This segregation begets low student engagement, performance, and outcomes which reinforces deficit views (Sharma, 2018; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). Deficit mind-sets affect how educators treat students and often contribute to the development of self-perceptions of inferiority among students (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004) and school leaders' attempts to explain away educational inequities as "normal and inevitable" (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001, p. 244).

In contrast, anti-deficit thinking rests on the belief that it is the responsibility of societal institutions such as school districts, rather than individual students and families who are treated inequitably, to end inequities. Table 1 identifies key differences between deficit and anti-deficit thinking. Leaders informed by anti-deficit thinking recognize families' strengths or assets and center them in school decision-making. This approach assumes that no group is inferior. Inequitable experiences and outcomes are attributed to systemic oppression and/or lack of knowledge about different cultural norms and experiences (Lowery & Romero-Johnson, 2023).

Anti-deficit thinking among school leaders is essential because principals lead vision setting, uphold professional commitments of their faculty and staff, and condone decision-making about student class placements. There is evidence that educators can shift away from deficit thinking and practices, which yields positive results (García & Guerra, 2004; McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). Superintendents of districts that demonstrated large-scale student improvement credited their state's accountability system for helping develop a "shift in their thinking" by "assisting them as leaders to alter the prevailing deficit norms in their school districts" (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001, p. 243). Accountability structures led superintendents to analyze data that showed indisputable evidence that inequities existed, to reevaluate their deficit thinking and develop antideficit leadership, and to develop a culture of higher expectations for academic achievement "for children of color and children from low-income homes" (p. 243). Professional development that deconstructed characteristics of deficit thinking, such as overgeneralizations about students' family backgrounds, avoided the conflation of cultural sensitivity and anti-deficit thinking, and purposefully linked equity knowledge to classroom practice led to changes in teachers' classroom practices that created equitable and inclusive environments for students and families (García & Guerra, 2004).

One way school leaders can address deficit views among educators is to reframe thinking about deficits to recognizing the strengths, assets, or funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) that students and families bring to school that have not been recognized but can be incorporated into school educational practices (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004). Yosso (2005) elaborated on these funds as forms of community cultural wealth. Another powerful way to dismantle deficit views is to embody antideficit thinking through leadership actions. Anti-deficit thinking is informed by

Table 1. Differences between deficit- and anti-deficit (asset) based thinking about students and families.

Deficit-Based Thinking	Asset-Based Thinking
Blames students and families for inequitable educational outcomes	Blames institutions for inequitable educational outcomes
Believes some communities have negative cultural and familial traits that impede academic success	Believes every community has value and identifies strengths that contribute to academic success
Seeks to assimilate different cultures into White, middle class norms and privileges standard English in all spaces	Honors different cultures, including students' familial and home languages
Sees "struggle" as primarily within students and families who are "at risk" of failure	Sees "struggle" as primarily within institutions which are unable to effectively reach all students and families
Focuses on what families need to change so they can achieve equity	Focuses on what school institutions need to change to create equitable access and opportunities
Understands identity groups as stereotypes and does not develop relationships to understand individuals	Understands identity group characteristics along with knowledge of individuals developed through trusting relationships
If advocates *for* families, does so with the assumption that families are incompetent and need a "savior"	Advocates *with* families by centering their voices and multiple forms of expertise, including lived experience
Focuses on what students and families cannot do	Focuses on what students and families can do
Holds *low expectations* for academic success and family engagement	Holds *high expectations* for academic success and family engagement
Maintains expectations for family engagement based on traditional White, middle-class practices	Creates and maintains expectations for family engagement based on practices that reflect the communities the school serves
Attributes lack of representation in rigorous classes and experiences to lack of student ability	Attributes lack of representation in rigorous classes and experiences to institutional lack of access and opportunity
Believes only select, currently performing students are capable of achieving academic success	Believes all students are capable of achieving academic success
Only has high expectations for students who are currently achieving	Has high expectations for all students
Discourse *limits* students' potential	Discourse *unlocks* students' potential
Is *pessimistic* (which may be conveyed as being realistic) that academic outcomes will change for students who currently under-perform, regardless of interventions	Is *hopeful* that academic outcomes will change for students who currently underperform, given culturally appropriate interventions
Does not engage in self-reflection about underlying assumptions	*Engages in self-reflection* about personal assumptions and societal factors that contribute to inequity

Adapted from Lowery & Romero-Johnson, 2023.

critical perspectives that question power within institutions that perpetuate inequity. Regarding Latina/o/x students, families, and school leaders, we situate anti-deficit thinking within critical race theory.

Critical race theory

Critical race theory (CRT) originated from legal scholars who posited that race and racism cannot and should not be absent from legal analysis (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT scholars argue that existing legal paradigms uphold White supremacy. Therefore, racism is endemic to US society and laws cannot be race neutral (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Additionally, CRT scholars reject White supremacy by centering the voices and lived experiences of historically marginalized racial groups in their research and analysis, which dismantles deficit notions of people of color. Yosso (2005) explained that analysis "through a CRT lens means critiquing deficit theorizing and data that may be limited by its omission of the voices of People of Color" (p. 75).

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) bridged CRT to education by theorizing race "as an analytic tool for understanding school inequity" (p. 48). Much scholarship has been written about CRT in education since their seminal piece was published. Common tenets of CRT in education include: a belief that racism is permanent in society; the intersectionality of race and racism with other forms of oppression; a disregard of colorblindness (or color evasiveness); and the centrality of the lived experiences and voices of people of color (Bernal, 2002; Solórzano, 1998).

Latino critical race theory (LatCrit), centers the lived experiences of Latino peoples in analyses by extending CRT to an examination of race and the effects of racism among Latinx peoples. It examines dimensions such as language, immigration, and sexuality (Bernal, 2002; Hernandez et al., 2014). For example, Solórzano's (1998) study of Chicano and Chicana graduate students through a LatCrit lens, revealed the ways in which they experienced microaggressions, were marginalized in the academy, and recognized how faculty meted out low expectations for them, which was evidence of deficit thinking.

Community cultural wealth

Yosso (2005) challenged deficit notions of historically marginalized groups (e.g. people of color) through her analysis of the ways in which cultural capital theory equates middle and upper middle norms with educational success. She argued that when viewed through a CRT lens, cultural capital is not limited to middle and upper middle classes. She explained, "CRT identifies various indicators of capital that have rarely been acknowledged as cultural and social assets in Communities of Color" (p. 82). Yosso theorized six forms of cultural capital that form the construct of community cultural wealth (CCW): aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant. CCW draws on funds of knowledge which assume that "people are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge" (González et al., 2005, pp. ix-x). Theorizing about CCW shifts one from deficit thinking about historically marginalized groups, to thinking about attributes of self-empowerment within their communities.

Education researchers explore CCW in a wide range of topics. Scholars found that Latina/o parents and students typically access one or more forms of CCW as they navigate education (Aragon, 2017; Guzmán et al., 2021). These findings underscore the error of deficit notions of Latina/o/x students and families.

The ways in which CCW informs the leadership practices of Latinx school administrators are increasingly analyzed. Rodela and Rodriguez-Mojica (2019) concluded four Latinx school leaders saw their "cultural, linguistic, and racial differences to the majority White administrators and teachers in their districts . . . as strengths in serving families in their schools, particularly Spanish-speaking Latinx students and families of color" (p. 310). The ways in which linguistic capital benefits Latino administrators and their school communities are explored (Méndez-Morse, 2004). Rather than Spanish seen as a deficit that should be fixed by learning English, Latino administrators value and promote bilingualism in schools (Avalos & Salgados, 2016). For example, a Latina administrator recognized that her "identity as a Spanish-speaking Latina was vital" for developing relationships and communicating with Latinx parents who may not otherwise talk with non-Spanish-speaking faculty (Martinez et al., 2016, p. 12).

Familial capital was important in the development of Latina leaders' educational and leadership goals (Martinez et al., 2016; Menchaca et al., 2017). Hernandez et al. (2014) examined how a Latina principal's racial identity was influenced by her appreciation for her family's high academic expectations. Her leadership was guided by a commitment to dismantling inequity and developing culturally responsive community and family engagement, with particular attention toward Latino families. These studies shed light on multiple ways Latina/o/x school leaders draw from their CCW to enact social justice and culturally responsive school leadership. When viewed through a culturally specific lens that centers Latina/o/x lived experiences, this leadership is Latino Educational Leadership (LEL) (Rodríguez et al., 2018).

Latino Educational Leadership

Rodríguez et al. (2018) defined LEL as leadership across the *p*-20 pipeline in the U.S. that "acknowledge[s] the importance of serving Latino communities and families . . . leaders who bravely and unapologetically validate and advance cultural, linguistic, and historical connections for Latino communities" (p. 15). The theoretical underpinnings of LEL are CRT and LatCrit. It is a form of

culturally responsive school leadership, which has much in common with early critical conceptualizations of social justice leadership.

Social justice school leaders identify and eliminate inequities faced by groups, often due to their identities such as race, gender, immigration status and country of origin, and class (Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2007). Therefore, social justice leaders advocate for and create equitable schools (Crawford & Fuller, 2017) at individual, institutional (school), and societal levels.

The rejection of deficit thinking vis-à-vis advocacy is crucial. Leadership, which advocates for historically marginalized groups as if they are saving them, most often emanates from a deficit-based perspective that the leader needs to save helpless people. This should not be misconstrued as asset-based advocacy which centers the voices of the people being served and the leader works as a partner to leverage resources in support of the group.

Researchers revealed how cultural capital informs the advocacy practices of Latina/o/x administrators. For example, DeMatthews et al. (2016) identified four key practices within a Mexican American female school leader's social justice leadership and advocacy in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico: a) a commitment to "learning about the lived experiences of marginalized communities;" b) reflective leadership that balances multiple purposes of schooling, well-being, and engagement; c) the rejection of notions that the leader knows all; and d) the development of socially just school–community partnerships that draw upon families' CCW. These practices are shared with culturally responsive school leadership.

Culturally responsive leadership "seeks to identify and institutionalize practices that affirm Indigenous and authentic cultural practices of students" (Khalifa et al., p. 1278). Four dimensions of this framework include 1) critical self-reflection about leadership behaviors; (2) the development of culturally responsive teachers; (3) promotion of a culturally responsive/inclusive school environment, and (4) engagement of students, parents, and Indigenous contexts. School leaders must resist deficit notions of students and families to engage authentically across these dimensions.

LEL shares characteristics of social justice and culturally responsive school leadership (Lowery & Romero-Johnson, 2023). According to Rodriguez et al., "Latino Educational Leadership in K-12 settings must foster democratic, inclusive, and collaborative educational practices … with school and district leaders who are willing to engage in activist practices alongside Latino families to combat educational, cultural, and social oppression" (2018, p. 8). Leadership practices include embracing a collective Latino identity, or *Latinidad*, CCW, and rejection of deficit thinking.

Rodriguez et al. drew from Applied Critical Leadership to assert that non-Latino leaders should build their capacity to support equitable achievement of Latina/o/s students. Applied Critical Leadership identifies attributes of a leader's identity that inform their critical approach to social justice-oriented change. Therefore, their leadership "results from both professional practice and leaders' embodied lived experiences" (Santamaría et al., 2014, p. 26). Rodríguez et al. (2018) explained, "The key, which is paramount to the concept of Latino Educational Leadership, is to prepare all leaders to be critical in their practice to serve and empower Latino communities and improve access and equity in schools and educational systems" (p. 15). Non-Latino leaders can do this by learning from the lived experiences of Latina/o/x students, families, and school leaders. This underscores the purpose of this article, which is to identify ways in which Latina/o/x school leaders enacted anti-deficit thinking.

Methods

CRT theorists argue that racism creates a narrative that upholds White dominance. Counterstorytelling challenges White dominance by highlighting the experiential knowledge of Latinaos while recognizing nuances within groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This method produces "stories of those people whose experiences are often not told" which can be used as "a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32), and sheds light on "the experiences of people of color that produce distinctive knowledge

to counter deficit storytelling" (Rolón-Dow & Davison, 2020, p. 4). *Testimonios* are first-person accounts or narratives which are autobiographical in nature. They include an analysis and contextualization of the author's experiences within LatCrit (DeNicolo et al., 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Study design and data collection

We conducted our general qualitative study by collecting and analyzing *testimonios* of eight Latina/o school leaders in two phases. The *testimonios* were collected through interviews which lasted from 45 to 70 minutes. During the first phase, we interviewed the only four Latina/o/x school leaders within Williams School District (WSD, a pseudonym), a Midwestern district in which we were both previously employed. We chose WSD as a site for inquiry because the district mirrored national trends of Latin/o/x student enrollment, achievement, and administrator underrepresentation. During the 2015–16 school year, Latinx students comprised 20.5% of the student population and four of approximately 110 administrators were Latinx administrators. Evidence that Latinx students in WSD were underserved includes disproportionately low academic test scores. During the 2015–16 school year, the percent of Latinx students who scored proficient or advanced on the state standardized assessment in English language arts was the second lowest (16.4%) among all race/ethnic groups (Lowery & Romero-Johnson, 2018). As Silvia (Author 2) was one of the administrators, she was included as a participant. Kendra (Author 1) interviewed the four leaders via phone. Pseudonyms are Antonio, George, Martha, and Martina.

The second phase consisted of interviews of four additional leaders which were conducted after we considered how we could further explore the lived experiences and leadership practices of Latinx administrators. Silvia contacted members of her cohort of a national leadership organization for Latino administrators. Four members agreed to participate and were assigned pseudonyms. Interviews were conducted via phone and Zoom. Silvia interviewed Cecilia, Sonia, and Velma. Kendra interviewed Enrique (Lowery & Romero-Johnson, 2023).

Participants

At the time of our interviews, two leaders, Antonio and Martha, were elementary school principals (grades K-5); one leader, George, was a high school principal (grades 9–12); and four, Cecilia, Martina, Sonia, and Velma, were district-level administrators. Enrique was a consultant and former principal (see Table 2).

Antonio grew up in the racially and culturally diverse Logan Square Neighborhood on the north side of Chicago. Both of his parents are first-generation immigrants from Mexico. Antonio was a bilingual teacher then assistant principal in Chicago before becoming an elementary school principal in WSD.

Cecilia attended school in greater Miami, Florida. Her parents immigrated from Cuba. She was a teacher, then elementary reading coach, district-level resource teacher for English language learners, district-level Title III coordinator, then Director of the Bilingual/ESOL office.

Enrique was born and raised in the Pico Union area of Los Angeles County, California. His parents immigrated from Ecuador. Enrique was a bilingual teacher's aide, athletic coach, elementary school teacher, and community resource teacher, assistant principal, then principal at the elementary, middle, and high school levels before becoming an education consultant.

George lived with his father and siblings in Toledo, Ohio, during the school year. During the summers, they lived with his mother in Chula Vista, California. Both parents immigrated from Mexico. George was a special education teacher then middle school principal in California before moving to WSD where he was a middle school principal then head principal.

Martha grew up in a predominantly White, upper-class suburb of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where she passed as White. Her mother is White American, and her father is Cuban. Martha taught in Portland, Oregon, and New Delhi, India, then came to WSD as a bilingual resource teacher. She was

Table 2. School leaders' names, backgrounds, and professional positions.

Name (Pseudonym)	Heritage Country of Origin	Place of Birth/ Childhood	Positions in p-12 Education	Position Held at Time of Interview
Antonio	Mexico	Chicago, IL; Logan Square Neighborhood	Bilingual teacher; Assistant Principal, Principal	Elementary Principal
Cecilia	Cuba	Hialeah, greater Miami, FL	Teacher, reading coach, district-level Resource Teacher for ELLs, Title III coordinator, Director of district's Bilingual/ESOL office	Director of district's Bilingual/ESOL office
Enrique	Ecuador	Pico Union area of Los Angeles County, CA	Bilingual teacher's aide, Athletic coach, Elementary school teacher, Community involvement resource teacher, Elementary, Middle, & High school principal	Consultant and author
George	Mexico	Toldeo, OH & Chula Vista, CA	Special Education teacher, Middle & High school principal	High School principal
Martha	Cuba & U.S.	Milwaukee, WI	Teacher, Bilingual resource teacher, Elementary School principal	Elementary principal
Martina	Argentina	Santiago del Estero, Argentina	Bilingual teacher, Principal, Executive Director of Office of Multilingual and Global Education	Executive Director of Office of Multilingual and Global Education
Sonia	Mexico	Rosarito, Baja California, Mexico	Bilingual teacher, Principal, Associate Superintendent	Associate Superintendent
Velma	Dominican Republic	Jersey City, New Jersey	Bilingual educator, Principal	Elementary Superintendent

hired as an elementary school principal of a K-2 elementary school that offers a Spanish dual language immersion program.

Martina grew up in northern Argentina. She attended public school until grade five then went to a private school. After college, Martina immigrated to the U.S. and becoming a bilingual teacher in WSD. She earned a doctorate and served as principal of the district's first K-5 Spanish dual language immersion elementary school, and as the executive director of the office of multilingual and global education.

Sonia was born in Rosarito, Baja California, a city in Mexico, which is close to the southern California border. She experienced culture shock as an immigrant to Los Angeles as a child. She began her career as a bilingual teacher, then principal, and Associate Superintendent.

Velma was born in northern New Jersey. Her parents immigrated from Dominican Republic. She attended nine different schools, some public and some parochial. She was a bilingual teacher in Compton, California, and several other districts, then taught in a large school district in an eastern state before becoming a principal, then elementary school superintendent.

Next, we explain our personal and professional positionality to shed light on our approach to this topic. As qualitative, critical researchers, we reject notions of positivist objectivity and recognize that our perspectives and experiences played a role in our approach to the study of anti-deficit thinking and Latina/o/x school leaders.

Silvia: My first job in education was in my native country of Argentina, where I was hired as an English as Foreign Language teacher for first and second graders. After immigrating to the United States of America, I realized my bilingualism was an asset, so I became an interpreter for Spanish-speaking families in a mid-size urban school district. Eventually, I became a bilingual mathematics teacher, teacher leader, principal, and a central office administrator.

The district experienced rapid growth in the enrollment of students who speak Spanish at home. One of my duties as a central office coordinator for bilingual and dual language programs was to support leadership teams to transform their schools to welcome students in dual language programs. I met Kendra during this time, and I appreciated her openness to learn. It isn't always easy for monolingual administrators to lead this change but being monolingual does not preclude one from being an effective advocate.

Kendra: My first public school position was as a Minority Services Counselor, whose function was to support the academic achievement of students of color in a high school. I spent many years as a classroom teacher, then offered district-wide professional development before becoming an assistant principal and assuming leadership of a dual language immersion program at a middle school. I developed a relationship with Silvia due to her central office role.

My monolingualism was a barrier to developing relationships with students and families who spoke Spanish. The interpreter was the trusted school personnel because they could communicate directly with the student and caregiver. It became clear why bilingual administrators in a bilingual school are essential. These experiences motivated me to begin learning Spanish, thereby creating possibilities for increased communication and relationships with Spanish-speaking families. Leading a dual language immersion program deepened my understanding about the importance of learning historic and contemporary contexts that situate the lived experiences of Latina/o/x families.

Data analysis

Data analysis occurred through constant comparison during which we examined and compared interview data within the same interview, between interviews within the same phase, and across interviews between both phases (Boeije, 2002; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). This was a continuous, three-cycle process throughout phases one and two.

During phase one, interviews were recorded, transcribed, and confirmed for accuracy by Kendra. Kendra engaged in the first and second cycles of coding. During the first cycle, she wrote memos and journaled her initial thoughts, then used methods of descriptive and in vivo coding, which captures short phrases word for word, to develop codes (Saldaña, 2009). Key words were identified and recorded with a brief description in a codebook. During the second cycle, similar words or phrases were grouped together to form categories. With each interview, as codes were identified and defined, Kendra revisited earlier transcriptions which resulted in new passages being coded or revised definitions or categories. These ongoing revisions occurred as a result of reading, re-reading and memo-ing, or through reflection while away from the text and journaling about ideas and connections. Per the district's external research committee, Silvia did not view raw data during the first and second cycles of data analysis because she was also a research participant. During the third cycle of coding, we both discussed preliminary codes, categories, and emergent themes of data which were assigned to pseudonyms. We discussed our individual interpretations of participant data in relation to extant literature and how to collapse multiple, similar categories into larger buckets of data, we generated as themes.

For analysis of the second set of four interviews (phase two) which were recorded and transcribed, we checked the transcriptions of their interviews for accuracy. The methods described during phase one were applied, except both of us engaged in reading the transcripts and comparing and developing codes and categories within and across the second set and first set of interviews. We met several times to discuss comparisons between the interviews and identify themes. Our discussions included our interpretations and reflections about content, the writing process, language, and application to existing research about Latina/o/x school leaders. We present excerpts from *testimonios* with our analysis in the next section. *Testimonios* are presented verbatim, except when edited for brevity, and to eliminate common speech patterns like repeated words, or filler words such as "um," "so" or "like."

Findings

Latina/o/x school leaders' *testimonios* revealed that they enacted anti-deficit thinking by a) upholding high expectations; b) embracing *Latinidad* which informed social justice advocacy; c) promoting bilingualism; and d) engaging parents and families equitably.

Upholding high expectations

Leaders who uphold high expectations for Latina/o/x students dismantle deficit thinking because they do not allow low expectations to frame their actions. One result of high expectations is equitable representation of Latina/o/x students in rigorous academic opportunities. For example, Antonio theorized that low academic expectations for Latina/o/x students is due to educators' perceptions of limited resources. Therefore, educators think "'we're gonna coddle or we're gonna water down instruction to help these kids out.' [Instead], it's really about having those high expectations and having those supports, to really help students be successful." Antonio related this to his own experience as a student. He recalled that teachers felt sorry for his family, which led to low expectations. As a result, Antonio said he lacked requisite academic skills in college. He became an administrator because he wanted to raise expectations and standards for Latino students in bilingual classrooms. He stated,

> I feel strongly about having high expectations because I know that I came from a community that struggled and had very limited resources, but I was able to do it because I had expectations for myself, my parents had high expectations, and I feel that's something that's needed at the school level.

Antonio upheld high expectations for all students. He asserted, "And I don't really see it as I'm just impacting Hispanics, I see it as I'm impacting kids of color and kids that are low income, because that's what I identify myself with."

George upheld high expectations by facilitating access to role models that Latinx students could relate to and by centering student voices. He explained, "I need kids to see that you can do all these other things and you can do it 'cause I could do it. And we can sit down and try to support you to get to there." George hired staff of color, "not because they were just staff of color, but because they are the most qualified people too," and called personal Latino male friends to be mentors, so students could see and interact with role models who looked like them. He further integrated students into the school and made it clear that their presence and ideas mattered by "giving the students voice and ensuring that we have opportunities to provide whether it's clubs whether it is groups, lunch groups after school, in which students have opportunities to voice their thoughts, their opinions." George's actions showed his belief that students could learn from role models who shared aspects of their identity and that students could make important contributions to school practices.

School leaders' high expectations were essential for outcomes that include equitable access and information about postsecondary opportunities, notably college. Cecilia expounded,

> It's our job as educators to inform [students] throughout middle school and high school of what that looks like, help them apply to college, help them find scholarships. Because the parents at home, they want it. They want what's best for their children.

Importantly, Cecilia operated from the assumption that parents want the best for their children, a form of aspirational capital (Guzmán et al., 2021; Yosso, 2005) and asset-based thinking. To summarize, manifestations of the school leaders' high expectations for Latina/o/x students included creating supports to facilitate high academic expectations in bilingual classrooms, creating access to role models and ensuring access to rigorous classes, and providing resources for college applications and scholarships.

Martina exemplified how this persistent commitment shifts a focus on student and family deficits to instructional leadership that interrogates inequity school practices, as she explained,

> I think we know from the current status quo that education does work for, say language-majority white families. It's working and we have data that show that. So I think we still have to work [to answer], What are the current excellent pedagogies that lead to excellence for students? We still need to implement that.

Upholding and creating structures to hold educators accountable for interacting and making decisions with and for students and families, along with implementing the best pedagogies and instructional

practices based on high expectations, are essential because enacting high expectations directly disrupts actions based on deficit thinking (Lowery & Romero-Johnson, 2023).

Latinidad informed social justice advocacy

School leaders' social justice advocacy practices were informed by pride in their Latino identities, cultures, and heritage, which they expressed in various ways. For example, Cecilia stated, "I love being a Hispanic, I love being a Latina, I love our culture." Her love of *Latinidad* was a basis for her advocacy for the equitable representation of Latino families' perspectives and needs in decision-making conversations. She explained,

> I think if we represent the students that we support in our district, there's just more advocacy for our kids. You have to be able to understand and identify with the students you serve, if you really want to have their best interests at heart. So, when I look around the room, and I'm the only Hispanic at the table, if I don't raise my voice, if I don't speak out, no one else is gonna speak up for them.

Cecilia articulated why inclusion of Latina/o/x school leaders who advocate for Latino families matters, particularly in relation to families learning English as a new language:

> We need to be at the table. We need to be having the conversation. We can't allow others who don't identify with our population or with our culture, or with our students to make decisions, which may not truly benefit our kids. And not just Latino because of the race, but languages, you know, our Haitian students, our Portuguese speaking students. Just our ELLs in general, regardless of where they're from. I can speak from the Hispanic point of view, but I can also speak from the ELL point of view, which will then encompass more cultures and other groups of students.

Cecilia's thinking about her identity as a school leader went beyond the benefits of numeric representation to the implications of increased representation for addressing Latina/o/x students' and families' needs. Her leadership actions included advocating for equitable treatment of families with the goal of benefiting students based on their perspectives, not just what she believed would benefit them. She accessed this information based on her lived experiences in combination with what she learned about families by purposefully engaging with them.

Similarly, Velma integrated lessons learned from her community while growing up into her leadership actions. She explained,

> Even though we lived in these communities that were ravaged by so many things, we were very insulated by our parents. And I bring that to my work. I bring the assumption that for immigrant communities, first generation communities, communities that have to struggle [with] the system, that it's not easy. So, when they enter a space where I have any kind of leadership role whether as a teacher, as an administrator . . . my number one duty is to do right by families. And to do right by them is to understand what their goals are for their children, and to help them reach those goals, whatever those are. Not to make assumptions about anything. That was a lesson learned from home.

Velma's commitment to community wellbeing reflects her enactment of familial capital (Yosso, 2005). Like Cecilia, her common lived experiences in combination with her concerted efforts to understand the particularities of the lived experiences of the students and families she served, informed her asset-based perspective about the efforts of immigrant and Latino families to participate in school. Her dedication to families with whom she identified so closely, indicated that her students and families were her *familia*.

Latina/o/x school leaders' cultural pride should not be taken for granted, given the ways in which mainstream schools often marginalize Latino cultures and the Spanish language. School leaders discussed the complexities inherent in the concept of *Latinidad*. For example, Antonio reflected,

> Within our culture there's a resentment toward the Hispanic term, because it indicates that we came from Spain, versus Latin America which is Latino. I don't have a preference [of] one over the other, I think it's just a term. I don't focus on the terms or even categorize myself as a strict Latino or a strict Mexican. I feel like because of the

> way that I was raised, and the community I was raised, I kind of have a little bit of each culture. It's more of an embodiment of the people I've been around.

Antonio stretched traditional notions about the meaning of identity and culture. Sonia emphasized another reality about the concept of *Latinidad* that must not be overlooked. While there is a collective culture, there is diversity within. She asserted, "Latinos in California are not monolithic [and] are very diverse in opinions on schooling."

Enrique reflected on how his cultural identity strengthened over time, which in turn, strengthened his leadership purpose and advocacy practices.

> I think that one of the underlying realities that we deal with both in and outside of schools, is access to power. Access to resources that would allow us to, not necessarily put others down, but to lift ourselves up. And, I think our leadership approaches keep that in mind, that this is about giving people access, and giving people a fair opportunity to better their lives and in the process better the lives of others.

Enrique's sense of a collective Latino identity shaped his view of leadership, in which we prioritized gaining access to power for resource and decision-making for Latina/o/x families.

Promoting bilingualism

Bilingualism (linguistic capital) was critical for leaders to create welcoming environments for Spanish-speaking families. This was accomplished by eliminating the language barriers that exist when a family's home language is not English. Linguistic capital "includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style" such as one or more languages, storytelling traditions, or art forms (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Most of the school leaders demonstrated linguistic capital as bilingual speakers of Spanish and English.

Martha did not grow up speaking Spanish; she learned it as an adult. At her DLI school, Spanish-speaking families are comfortable speaking their home language because Spanish is a dominant language. This increased family and faculty communication. She explained that DLI

> "breaks down language barriers with teachers and families," which she thinks is important because "communication can be one of the biggest hurdles to overcome. Whether it's a potluck or it's coming in for a celebration, [Spanish-speaking families] know that their language is privileged in the school."

Some school leaders became bilingual despite being pressured to speak English when they attended school. Velma was thankful that her family valued Spanish language. She remembered, "even though at school I was told I could only speak English, at home my parents were very clear '*aqui no sabe Ingles*.' (You cannot speak English.)" She continued, "Even though when you're young, it feels very heavy. [Now] my cultural and ethnic identity feels very solid. I feel so lucky that I have the richness of my language and my culture at my fingertips."

Velma's expression of love for her language and culture is important because it framed her actions as a bilingual school leader. She understood that speaking and listening to families who spoke Spanish increased the potential they would feel heard by school leaders when they advocated for their children. She wondered, "How do you know that you have voice if you never see anyone that understands you?" She "did a lot of translating at IEP [Individualized Education Program] meetings, because sometimes the folks that were sent to translate were terrible." During IEP meetings, educators and families review the educational services students who receive special education receive. Therefore, equity-oriented leaders must ensure parents can truly understand the language of the IEP.

Velma also celebrated the cultural and linguistic diversity of families. She emphasized it is important to have "a narrative that's not about the deficit of our community, but rather, it's the celebration of we have some incredible people in our community that demonstrate culturally and linguistically, all of the things that we love." She compared this to her own schooling:

> But that didn't exist in my schools. I had to choose between learning English because I entered school Spanish dominant. I remember specifically being told to speak only English. So, for many years, I was silent in school. For me, my work is about how do I never allow that silence.

Velma's actions to ensure Spanish-speaking families' avenues to voice their knowledge and advocacy for their children are not impeded due to language barriers that marginalize Spanish were informed by her own schooling experiences.

Martina's parents supported her aptitude for multilingualism throughout her childhood, which her employers quickly identified. Like the other leaders, her linguistic capital was crucial for her ability to directly connect with families. She explained how language and access to power in terms of school decision-making have material consequences for families, as she stressed the importance of multilingualism as a leader:

> Bilingualism and multilingualism is a concrete way that has opened doors for me to connect with people of different backgrounds, directly. A monolingual principal has to rely on an interpreter all the time, and usually the interpreter becomes the broker and sometimes the power conduit. The communication can stop with the interpreter, if the interpreter doesn't realize what power they have. What I saw, was that many families were being cut off from direct access to the decision makers. And that's a shortcoming then for the principal that's monolingual, when they give up the power and the power to listen to parents, to the interpreter.

Similarly, Antonio, who is a bilingual Spanish speaker, was able to avoid the challenges Martina described above. He told families they could talk directly to him, rather than relying on an interpreter. He recalled, "I basically made it very clear, 'You can always talk directly to me. There's not a language barrier, you can talk to me.'" This example demonstrates that messaging to families that he was bilingual and accessible was an important aspect of effective leadership actions.

Engaging parents and families equitably

School leaders centered Latina/o/x families and included multiple voices in decision-making in their approaches to parent/family engagement. They sought to learn from families. Familial capital is "cultural knowledges nurtured among *familia* (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition," engages a commitment to community well being" and a "broad understanding of kindship" (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). Antonio's upbringing in a diverse neighborhood developed his appreciation for diversity and commitment to community well being:

> I grew up in a neighborhood called Logan Square . . . Very diverse. I grew up around Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, some Cubans. There [were] some African Americans and a pretty large amount of Filipinos at that time. For the most part, I attended Chicago public schools. Growing up in elementary school, we were brought up to really give back to the community. So, I think that's something that really shaped my values and my direction.

Cecilia explained, "I try to understand what [families'] needs are, where they're coming from, so that we can better serve them." She added, "To me, it's not you hold a leadership position, and you are in charge." An anti-deficit approach meant that school leaders worked alongside parents rather than as experts who assumed parents needed to be told what to do. Velma explained how her transformation in this regard "was the biggest lesson for [her] as a teacher and as a principal." She recounted,

> I had to learn what it meant to be co-conspirators in the work. In the beginning, I was trained very traditionally, like most teacher programs, where you send out information. "Oh, *su hija hi* (your daughter) didn't bring her homework." It took time, and I will say, I was humbled very fast. Especially in the community where I taught, that wasn't enough. That wasn't going to give me any results. And that if I didn't figure out–it's not the mom that I call, it's actually the *tia* (aunt). And they don't live with their dad, they actually live with the grandmother. I had to figure out the complexity of our community's actual network. And specifically, [the] network of support for their children.

These experiences ignited Cecilia's memories of her own upbringing, which was just as complex. She continued,

> Because we always had an *abuela* (grandmother) or *tio* (uncle) or somebody in the house, helping with the kids . . . my knowledge of that absolutely helped me think about how to include Latino families in what was almost the antithesis of what I was taught in the teacher program.

Even though Velma shared similar experiences with families in her own upbringing, she situated herself as a learner of families because she understood there is diversity within similar experiences that must be understood. She said,

> I feel really lucky to have learned. Those 10 years as the principal took it to even a different level of learning. Like my even assuming, just because I'm Dominican, I have a similar story to the person in front of me who's Dominican, too? *Para nada* (Not at all). Really always being open to that lesson of what is unique about this family that I'm speaking to right now, that's gonna help me move the academic goals and the hopes and dreams of that family for that student that I am serving.

Enrique incorporated parents' experiences into his decision-making. For example, families came forward and told him, "We really appreciate all your emphasis on college, but we don't know what that is. We've never been to one." In response, the school arranged parent university tours.

Sonia recognized that parents wanted to know how their children were doing in school. They asked, "*como se portan* (How are the kids behaving)?" She encouraged creative ways for parents to engage in learning with their children, such as parent workshops where the parents wrote books about their life as a child which they read to their children.

Martha encouraged Latino parents to ask questions and determine if the dual language immersion program was the right fit for their students, rather than automatically placing their children in the DLI program. She stated, "I think that by trying to convince them [to only consider DLI], I'm taking away the power that they have to make decisions for their families."

The school leaders' *testimonios* reveal the potential for providing equitable supports for students when culturally responsive leaders listen to and include diverse parents in decision-making.

Discussion

Rodríguez et al. (2018) asserted, "Latino Educational Leadership in K-12 settings must foster democratic, inclusive, and collaborative educational practices . . . with school and district leaders who are willing to engage in activist practices alongside Latino families to combat educational, cultural, and social oppression" (p. 8). The dismantling of deficit thinking about Latina/o/x communities is a cornerstone of this leadership. Figure 1 represents the ways in which Latina/o/x leaders in this study exhibited LEL and enacted anti-deficit thinking by upholding high academic expectations, embracing *Latinidad* which informed advocacy, promoting bilingualism, and equitable parent/family engagement.

We agree with Rodríguez et al. (2018) that leaders who are not Latino can develop the capacity to be social justice leaders that create equitable access to engaging and rigorous academic opportunities for Latina/o/x students and families. All school leaders should become advocates for social justice with the same level of tenacity as their Latina/o/x counterparts. Commitment to equity based on a belief that Latina/o/x families are inherently capable of academic success is essential. Anti-deficit leadership requires leaders to connect directly with students and families, listen and learn from Latina/o/x communities about their community cultural wealth, and incorporate their cultures into the school environment and curriculum (Khalifa et al., 2016; Yosso, 2005). One way to enhance opportunities for such connections learning from Latina/o/x families is for administrators to become bilingual.

The *testimonios* of eight Latina/o/x leaders provide insight into the development and enactment of anti-deficit thinking. We also identified practices and mind-sets that contribute to equitable education environments, which non-Latina/o/x leaders can implement. An essential question for future researchers and school administrators involved in hiring is: How do *p*-12 districts acknowledge and value anti-deficit (strengths-based) leadership approaches of Latina/o/x administrators?

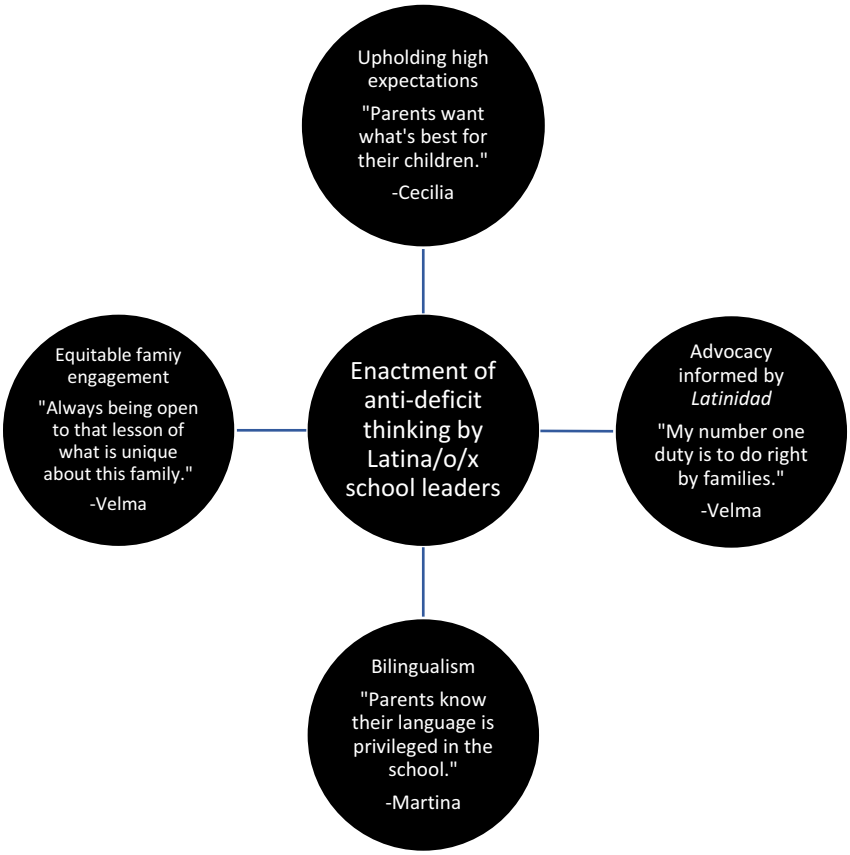

Figure 1. Enactment of anti-deficit thinking by Latina/o/x school leaders.

Importantly, the leaders revealed that their leadership actions stemmed from their beliefs, which is reflective of previous research that documents "the relationship of personal beliefs to professional practice" (Nelson & Guerra, 2014, p. 70). School leaders must believe that Latina/o/x students are capable of high achievement to create and maintain the high expectations necessary to support equitable engagement, access, and achievement in schools. This begs the question: how might an employer authentically assess a candidate's beliefs in this regard? Our participants revealed that their personal and professional lived experiences were sources of their anti-deficit practices. Therefore, a promising approach is to plainly ask this of candidates. Employers might ask candidates about their beliefs regarding educational possibilities of children and families from a variety of cultural, social, educational, and economic backgrounds, and follow up by asking what lived experiences contribute to those beliefs. This might yield opportunities to understand how candidates have engaged with, experienced, or acknowledge community cultural wealth in their own lives or students and families which is a promising indication they may have an asset-based approach to leadership. Anti-deficit school leaders believe that all students are capable of achievement and that no educator should limit students' aspirations based on the educator's ignorance or personal biases. The school leaders in this study provided additional insights into how their anti-deficit thinking was manifested to create equitable access and opportunities for Latina/o/x students and families.

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