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Latina Superintendents in New Mexico and their Glass Ceilings

Abstract:

This paper looks at the stories shared by Latina school leaders regarding their ascendance to the superintendency in New Mexico. The social, political, and cultural supports and challenges that they experienced along the way to their top positions in school leadership are discussed including the impact of gender barriers, power differentials, the value of their trusted networks and mentors, and maintaining a sense of mission and direction for themselves and their districts.

Authors employed a qualitative portraiture design to ensure authenticity of voice and critical race and feminist frameworks to commit to a vision of liberation in learning and leadership.

Keywords:

Educational change; power and politics, critical race theory, feminist inquiry, gender barriers, school leadership; Latinas; educational administration

Latinas in the superintendency

Extant research in the field of educational change and reform demonstrates a historically consistent and disproportionate number of men hired for K–12 school leadership positions across the nation (Brown, 2018; Glass, 2000; Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000; Glass & Franceschini, 2007; Grogan & Brunner, 2005; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Kowalski, McCord, Petersen, Young, & Ellerson, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2018; Stroh, 2012). Since the 1800s, white men have held 82–99% of all superintendencies since the position was created (Brunner & Grogan, 2007; Glass et. al., 2000). The number of women superintendents has slowly climbed nationwide over the decades, but women are still in the minority at 27% (AASA, 2015). Unequal ethnic representation of Latinas in leadership positions within institutions, as well as a dearth of literature on Latina school leaders, is an issue meriting research and attention. The interest in learning more about the experience of Latinas in school leadership is growing and a number of scholars have begun the charge to contribute to this need and gap in the educational leadership literature (Gonzales et al., 2016, Hernandez et. al., 2016; Martinez et al., 2020; Yosso, 2015).

The position of the superintendency holds much power in the educational system as it is the top position in the hierarchy and the chief executive officer in a school district (Norton, Webb, Dlugosh, & Sybouts, 1996). Therefore, it is important to consider past hiring and equity practices as well potential future directions of educational reform to remedy the gender imbalance in this central school leadership position. In the course of this paper, we investigate the factors that contributed to successful Latina superintendent appointments in order to better understand how to facilitate this process.

This paper continues the dialogue on systemic socially just K-12 school leadership practices and helps to fill the gap in the literature on gender and top leadership work experience

differences between women and men, the hiring process of superintendent positions, and the supports and barriers experienced by women and traditionally underserved populations in our K-12 educational systems. Latinas, in particular, are underrepresented in educational leadership not only nationally, but even in border states like New Mexico where the percentage of Latinx students is very high. Although Latinx populations are rapidly growing, there are not representative numbers of Latinas in leadership positions (Catalyst, 2002). Latinas represent only a mere 2.7% of nationwide educators who hold the position of school superintendent (Finnan & McCord, 2018). While the number of Latinas in leadership positions has increased, Latinas have not yet achieved proportionate representation in significant leadership roles throughout higher levels of leadership, spanning all sectors of work and especially the education sector (Martinez et al., 2020; Vasquez & Comas-Díaz, 2007).

During the 2017–2018 school year, of the 89 school districts in New Mexico, only 10 Latinas (19%) served as school superintendents (Mondragon & Stapleton, 2005). Three of these women-leaders in the borderland state of New Mexico shared their stories as Latina superintendents in New Mexico with us and helped us identify some of the factors that led to their career success and how they approached and overcame the barriers they faced along the way.

Our main research question was: What factors do Latina school superintendents in New Mexico perceive to be determinants that led to their successful appointments as superintendents, and how did they circumvent gender barriers? Secondary questions included were: What barriers do Latinas report, evidenced by their authentic stories en route to the superintendency? What key barriers should Latina women seeking the superintendency be cognizant of? And, what do Latina

superintendents think about what it means to be among the few women in a men-dominated occupation?

Critical race and feminist frameworks

Critical feminist theory (CFT) “generates its problematics from the perspective of women’s experiences” is done *for* women by providing women with explanations that they “want and need” and emphasizes the “importance of studying ourselves, and ‘studying up,’ instead of ‘studying down’” (Harding, 1987, p. 8). Feminist inquiry “locates the researcher in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter” (Harding, 1987, p. 8). Hegemony and misogynistic hiring practices have discouraged women from seeking administrative positions, particularly those in high societal positions, which has led to the oppression of women educators (Valian, 1999). Feminist theory is utilized to understand Latinas’ perceptions of male hegemony, sex-role stereotyping, and the structure of public school institutions as they relate to the role and appointment of school superintendents (Miller, 2009).

Patriarchal hegemony continues in hiring and systemic educational leadership practices today, even though research has supported the supposition that “women who aspire to and become superintendents not only meet but exceed preparation requirements and expectations” (Brunner & Kim, 2010, p. 276). The leadership of a school superintendent significantly impacts the direction of the district and overall student achievement of students in the district. Leadership is the most influential factor affecting policy, local priorities, and the overall quality of students’ learning ([author] et. al., 2015; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Maintaining a race and gender balance in educational leadership is beneficial for staff, students, and the district itself, and a diversity of perspectives, backgrounds, and ideas supports leadership in seeking progress. From a critical race standpoint (Martinez, 2014), this research purports the

notion that women and Latina's lived experiences in the field can influence educational policy and practice on a systemic scale; and the cultural array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contracts (Yosso, 2005) of these women, that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged, can help break discriminatory barriers (hooks, 2015), unequal gender role patterns, and hegemonic practices (Palmer, 2012).

Portraiture and lived experience

Portraiture as described by Lawrence-Lightfoot (2016, 1997, 1983) was chosen as the best mode of inquiry for this research because it provided an in-depth and detailed understanding of the authentic life stories of three Latina school superintendents in New Mexico. Critical race and feminist frameworks were used to allow for Latina superintendents to share their voices and authentic stories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005; Merriam, 2009) as under-represented leaders of school districts in New Mexico. "Portraiture is a genre whose methods are shaped by empirical and aesthetic dimensions, whose descriptions are often penetrating and personal, whose goals include generous and tough scrutiny" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, p. 369), "and you are, of course, creating relationships with the people who you are interviewing and whose lives you're trying to capture, that are trusting and communicative and respectful; you are working on creating and sustaining authentic encounters" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016, p. 20).

Portraiture as a mode of inquiry in qualitative research can be critical in nature when it challenges the existing hegemonic practices by sharing counter-stories of disenfranchised people and groups and increasing sensitivity and responsiveness to issues of power, position, race, class, gender, and socio-economic status (Meyer, 2018). This research challenges the traditional structures and practices of hiring practices in the superintendency and honors and addresses the struggles and challenges of the women who broke the glass ceilings in the field of educational

administration and leadership.

As cultural understandings differ by context, such as the importance and influence of familia (Carteret, 2011; [author], 2019), the patron system of politics in New Mexico (our version of the good ol' boys club), and marianisma (Gil & Martinez, 1996; Jezzini, Guzman, & Grayshield, 2008) in the Southwestern United States; we chose the research design to further understand and depict the experiences of the Latina superintendents who shared their stories with us. Participants were chosen through purposive sampling and 3 out of a potential pool of 16 agreed to be participate in the study. Latina superintendents in New Mexico. They were contacted via email to ask if they would like to participate in the study.

Two in-person, one-hour interviews using semi-structured questions were conducted with each co-participant (Patton, 2015; Wolcott, 2008). Observations and field notes (Creswell, 2012), and collection of artifacts shared by the Latina superintendents and found online were used as data sources. We also asked the superintendents to write short poems describing their role and self as a Latina school leader. Analysis protocol was driven by adding layers of complex analysis by organizing recurring themes as described by Creswell (2014) and using the Zoom Model created by Pamphilon (1999).

The Zoom Model underscores that three levels of meaning may be found in participants' narrations of a phenomenon: macro-zoom (corresponding to the socio-historical dimension, collective meanings), meso-zoom (reflecting personal level of values), and micro-zoom (which examines emotions and characteristics of voice). The combination of these three levels of meaning reveals the complexity of the phenomenon better than any one level of meaning alone (Pamphilon, 1999, p. 93).

Data collection and analysis focused on context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and the aesthetic whole as main aspects of conducting portraiture research (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) and findings were analyzed using the extant literature in the field and chosen feminist and critical race theory frameworks (Harding, 2014; Yosso, 2005).

Findings

Identity and dedication to learning and leadership

Each of these Latinas shared her love of learning and lifelong commitment to serving students, colleagues, and women aspiring to be future school leaders. Other characteristics that unified the participants included their Latina identities, motherhood, faith, and deep commitment to professional development and learning. As interviews were conducted, the participants communicated their successful journeys to the superintendency and how they blazed their own trails. All participants agreed that the primary reasons they succeeded professionally were their resiliency, perseverance, and commitment to the profession. They reported having a person or people encouraging them to advance themselves, and they all reported seeking and creating their own system of support and mentorship along the way to the superintendency. These women did not let motherhood deter them from advancing their careers and with the support from their families, they learned to balance their career and home lives.

While each of the superintendents discussed barriers she perceived, each had focused on her commitment to professional success and preparation for upper administration. They reported barriers including: the initiation to school politics and the degree to which politics impacts the role of a superintendent; the role social networks play in the appointment of a superintendent (in New Mexico also referred to as the *patron* system); gender nonconformity; and the many facets of gender inequity that is commonplace for women, especially Latinas, who serve as superintendents.

The participants excelled in their careers because they were professionally connected, educationally advanced, driven, and as one participant described it, “good chess players.” Each discussed her role with great pride, humility, and the desire to empower and support a new

generation of Latina educational leaders. The lived experiences that gave these Latina superintendents the opportunity to serve in leadership roles, as well as the networks and opportunities they received from their leading leadership roles, helped build their mindfulness of others, helped them gain self-confidence in being a leader, and increased their willingness to serve as mentors to others.

Develop a professional network

The first recommendation from the Latina superintendents who shared their stories with us was to encourage aspiring superintendents to build their social capital and networks early on and throughout their career, as these relationships help aspiring superintendents develop a deeply rooted professional network. These relationships can link new leaders to opportunities, build professional references for the future, and connect new leaders with professional opportunities and/or professional organizations. In researching the socialization process of women in education, Whitaker and Lane (1990) argued that the system continues to apply old stereotypes, stereotypes that perpetuate the belief that men manage the schools and women nurture the learners, thus reinforcing the “appropriate” gender roles in the structure of educational administration. As this study found, these standards have not changed much in school leadership in the state of New Mexico, and so we must consider a change in this mindset in these social circles. Latinas are often tied to their responsibilities at home, and as evidenced by these women, their participation in networking events outside of the workday or in non-structured settings is less likely to occur for them than for their male colleagues.

Participate in a structured mentorship development program

Valuing the profession and the many building blocks that help Latinas climb the professional ladder are instrumental in upward mobility and overall success. “Be humble, you

don't have all the answers" was a statement from one of the superintendents. This understanding of not being 'everything to everyone' was shared by all three women and a consistent finding in our research on the superintendency ([author] et al., 2015). All three women sought opportunities for professional development, local trainings, and invitations from colleagues to engage in either a formal or informal mentorship. Their suggestion to future Latina superintendents was to take these opportunities as often as possible as they are important and immensely helpful to learning and networking with those who can build and support your career and future aspirations. They will also provide a network of support when work and life are not in your favor.

Advance your professional credentials

Latinas who work in school administration must prepare to be highly competitive candidates. In order to compete with other candidates, they must advance themselves professionally through credentialing. The Latinas who had ascended to the position of superintendent all spoke of their self-motivation to obtain advanced degrees, participate in leadership programs, and seek other professional development opportunities. The superintendents who shared their stories with us said that we as a society must prepare Latinas to break free from the "sticky floor" and reach for the "glass ceiling". "Sticky floors are our self-limiting beliefs, assumptions, and sabotaging behaviours that undermine not only our own ability, but that of other women—to achieve their career goals and maximise the value we can bring to our teams and organisations" (Wirya, 2017). Wirya reminds us that, aside from the many other barriers leading Latinas face, sticky floors keep dragging us down every time we get a foot up the ladder.

Build strong relationships with your professional peers

School administrators in the United States, particularly ethnic minorities, are not part of a larger network of professionals. The Latina school leaders observed in this study were linked and connected with each other through professional organizations, colleagues, and other social networks. However, their success resulted from the relationships and connections they established with ~~their~~ colleagues and other professionals throughout their careers. Consequently, aspiring leaders have too few institutional opportunities to cross school boundaries and form close linkages with surrounding communities in “porous” relationships (Furman, 2002). This trend is observed particularly strongly in K-12 schools where cross-school and district learning opportunities are rare or limited.

Remain confident, humble, and be your authentic self

The Latina superintendents in this study spoke repeatedly about staying humble and authentic. They purported that regardless of the honor, prestige, hard work, and pride of being among the few Latina superintendents in the nation, one must always remember to remain confident, yet humble, and to stay true to one’s authentic self. The Latina leaders who were interviewed all agreed that it is important to stay connected to one’s femininity and, as a Latina or woman, you may do things differently, but you should never measure success or failure according to the way a man may have done the job. The participants in this study dared to dream, failed, got back up, and remained their true and authentic selves.

Contact local leaders

The findings of this study support the supposition that Latina leaders can and should lobby, network and communicate with their local leadership. Educating our local leadership and informing them about the inequities Latina leaders experience when it relates to job opportunities, pay gaps, and the administrative contracts which are executed is critical to

changing the oppressive practices of the past. Latina leaders and their advocates need to stand up, speak up, and step up, to influence the educational changes needed for equity for Latina leaders.

Discussion

This research shared the findings of a portraiture research study about Latina school leaders in New Mexico and their experiences, challenges, and support systems during their ascendency to the superintendency. Portraiture was chosen as a method of inquiry so that we could better understand, articulate, and contextualize the influence of the professional and personal experiences of Latina superintendents in New Mexico as they pursued opportunities in educational administration and served their districts. The data demonstrated that regardless of how different their lives were in some respects, the participants shared many of the same professional experiences. They were at different ages, stages, and comfort levels in their careers; however, each exhibited strength and perseverance while breaking glass ceilings, shattering stereotypes, and blazing a trail for others to travel.

The primary themes that emerged from this study included: a) relevant relationships, b) remembering your roots, c) meaningful mentorship, d) resiliency, e) responsible risk taking, and (f) the balancing act, all of which are important and central to this study.

Relevant Relationships

Social capital, networking, and bridge-building are necessary for administrative success. These women not only challenged traditional norms, but they shared the importance of these relationships both then and now. “Various forms of capital are not mutually exclusive or static, but rather are dynamic processes that build on one another as part of community cultural wealth” (Yosso, 2005). One participant stated that,

“Strong networks can positively impact the district...building upon existing relationships can lead to promotions, referrals, and career advancement. For me, I advanced because of the positive role models I had who believed in me and empowered me to pursue new opportunities that advanced my career.”

Another of the participants shared that she was encouraged to consider the superintendency by a friend,

“While being a superintendent was a thought, it was never something I would have actively pursued. It was the belief and vision of a longtime friend that encouraged me to pursue the position and I gained the confidence and motivation to apply. The relationships we establish throughout our lives contributed to the decisions we make throughout our lives. I am thankful for all of the relationships that I have established and the contribution they have made to my life either as a blessing or a lesson.”

Remembering Your Roots

The participants maintained the values of *marianismo*, yet carried them out in ways that challenged the heart of *marianismo*. These Latinas valued their roots, raised their children, and carried on family traditions, but also took on top administrative roles, including the superintendency, and honored their ancestors along the way. Participants spoke of resilience, family, life lessons learned and the challenges they faced during their lives and career.

“I was a young mother, and being a young mother impacted my overall decision career wise, so instead of going to law school, I decided to pursue teaching. I wanted a career that would allow me to be on the same schedule as my son...being a moth change my trajectory. Growing up as a child, I spent a summer homeless, and my father raised me my entire life, which was non-traditional during that time. My dad raised me, and he raised me to be strong. As a school leader, it’s knowing the needs of your community that made you a strong leader, and doing something to meet those needs. I feel that my life experiences, my support, and my life mentor who is my dad were most important to who I am, where I am, and the principles I stand by.”

Another participant also spoke of her father and the spirituality that guided her work and career trajectory,

“Reflecting on my life and those who have influenced and supported me, I can say that I am thankful for my parents. My father’s pride when I took over as superintendent will forever stay imprinted in my mind. He was so proud, and I remember seeing the pride on his face...my faith and spirituality also carried me then and now.”

Meaningful Mentorship

The participants discussed the informal mentorship they received and the roles they have now taken on as mentors themselves in a professional world that continues to devalue women and, more specifically, Latinas, when it comes to building capacity within the public school K–12 systems. Participants noted the professional importance of friends and colleagues, and how their informal mentorships served the same purpose as more formal ones. While these relationships were not the sole determinants of their success, they served as a core motivation for many of their critical decisions they made in their careers. In addition, all three women actively searched for their mentorship as it was not common practice to provide official mentorship or training.

“Back when I was hired as an administrator, there were no formal mentorships. I found myself seeking the advice and mentorship of people in the field. I would often go to them and say, ‘Today, I’d like you to be my mentor’...and I found myself creating my own mentorships on the job. Today I know that it is my responsibility to pay it forward and to mentor the women in my organization and beyond.”

Resiliency

Derrington and Sharratt (2009) offered words of wisdom from other women superintendents. They recommended an iron will, in recognition that women have to fight harder, wait longer, and survive more scrutiny to become a superintendent. The participants in this study made strikingly similar claims. They said they had to have ‘thick skin,’ a will to succeed, and the ability to take everything in stride. One participant stated that,

“I don’t think I fit anyone’s mold of what they perceived a superintendent to be when I was hired. I was Latina. I was much younger looking than other superintendents, and I was not a local to the rural community I was hired in...I had to work a little bit harder to prove that I was worthy of having the position.”

Another participant stated the need to work harder as a woman and not always getting the respect that she deserved in such a challenging and important role,

“There were times as superintendent that I dealt with a lack of respect. I couldn’t understand it at the time...and as a woman I had to be more assertive and to show that I was not going to back down from my decision...I knew that I needed to stand strong.”

Responsible Risk Taking

According to Grogan and Shakeshaft (2011), the underrepresentation of women in the superintendency is not due to females not being motivated or certified for the position, but rather that often they are undervalued, mis-read, and passed over for top positions. These Latina leaders challenged the norm, took risks in applying for top positions, and accepting assignments that challenged them in new ways so they could build their reputation as a serious contender for top-tier positions.

“I applied because I wanted to change things. I wanted to make an impact on education in the Valley. It took someone to open the door for me to take the leap.”

Another participant stated the need to challenge systems of power knowing that there would be potential backlash from powerful organizations.

“I made bold decision and voted against initiatives that were not in the best interests for students, but would potentially benefit powerful organizations. I had to be confident, to promote access to quality education for all students in New Mexico.”

The Balancing Act

According to feminist standpoint theory, women’s lives differ systematically and structurally from men’s lives, and because of this, Latinas are faced with tough decisions. Every day they face balancing their social, cultural, and familial responsibilities, and maintaining their professional careers. While this study clearly challenges many of the ten commandments of *marianismo* (such as “Don’t forget the place of the woman; don’t give up your traditions; don’t have your own opinions [and]; don’t put your needs first,” these Latinas value their families and prioritized their roles as mothers, finding ways to balance their relationships, work, and

responsibilities. Each Latina spoke of her individual challenges and made evident that one must be willing to experience discomfort, uncertainty, and the possibility of failure before success when taking the road less traveled. Success comes from taking risks, facing fears, and traveling uncharted waters. A unifying personality trait of the participants was the willingness to accept the risk and lean on their support systems when they faced challenges and setbacks in their careers and districts.

None of these Latina leaders expected to be looked upon as an example for others, but each spoke of empowering and supporting other women and other Latinas. “We may not be able to persuade non-feminists that the institution of patriarchy is evil and should be dismantled” (Hekman, 1997, p. 362), but we can call out the injustices and demand respect, equality, and working environments that are inclusive of diversity and fairness. During the interviews, the superintendents noted how often leaders compete for a seat at the table rather than bringing in new chairs and working together. If we as leaders find ways to support one another rather than knock each other down, we can build a stronger foundation and a system that is inclusive and supportive, which ultimately benefits the most important stakeholder of all—the students. Collaboration and mutual support would engender a wholesome leadership model that would allow for less competition and more teamwork as we prepare our children for the future.

Participants’ success was often springboarded by their own will to pursue the superintendency, their lifelong commitment to learning, and their passion for and commitment to the children they serve. The Latina superintendents believed in themselves and were willing to challenge the status quo. Although barriers existed, their credentials certainly helped, and the most powerful determinant to their success was their own will to succeed. They continue to encourage, mentor, and empower other Latinas to take a seat at the table. The primary

beneficiaries of this movement are the children they serve. Children need to see people to whom they can relate, who look like them, and come from backgrounds similar to their own. Because of participants' success, they inspire others, both young and old.

Findings of this research provide several implications for practice that could help improve the understanding of Latina administrators and superintendents and the following suggestions are specific to Latinas practicing in New Mexico. The suggestions are not intended to change the K–12 trajectories for all Latina school administrators; however, the success of these Latina leaders is an example of their abilities. They prove that the obstacles they continue to face can be conquered, including those that appear to be purposefully and strategically placed by the dominant group in a way that is coordinated to lead to failure.

One could postulate that while these Latinas have demonstrated their abilities as leaders and their capabilities for success, they continue to face colleagues and administrations that devalue their authenticity. Many of these Latinas have found that, as the only or as one of only a handful of Latina superintendents, they experience what academics refer to as imposter syndrome (Clance, 1985; Sherman, 2013). They observed that some high achieving people have a secret sense that they can't live up to others' expectations, and often they deeply personalize their own failures instead of using them as experiences from which to learn. Those with imposter syndrome often hold themselves to impossibly high standards and feel shame, insecurity, and low self-esteem when they don't meet their own expectations. But progress, not perfection, is what really matters (Sherman, 2013). The participants also reported that they found comfort in hearing familiar talk among their colleagues.

Due to the limited number of Latinas in the role of superintendent, participants themselves did not have access to Latina role models or mentors, and even now have very little

interaction with other Latina superintendents. The Latina participants agreed that it is important that young Latinas are mentored by other Latinas who are sensitive to their unique experiences. Therefore, it is important to initiate mentorship if mentorship is not readily available or offered. As these Latina school leaders noted, mentorship was central to their success and, despite their mentoring coming predominately from their male counterparts, they are grateful for that guidance, and cannot stress how critical mentorship played in their overall day-to-day success.

The New Mexico Public Education department needs to examine the gender disparity among the superintendents in New Mexico and work with the state and local institutions of higher education to motivate, encourage, and reward our state's best educators. The imbalance of numbers of Latina leaders compared with the number of Latina/o students in New Mexico is alarming and heeds reparation. The participants in this study were all native New Mexicans who worked their way up the ranks—forward-looking thinkers who lead with heart. This study did not look at what impact the size of a district had on the frequency of women being hired. However, two of the three participants have led larger school districts, and further research could explore whether larger school districts in New Mexico have less involvement in the *patron* system or if the larger districts are more open minded. The study did find, surprisingly, that all three participants had special education administration backgrounds. One participant specifically noted this might have been a factor in their preparedness for the position of superintendent, since special education administration is riddled with policies, compliance regulations, and a need for good organizational skills, along with a litany of other demands of the job.

Through this study, changes can begin with regard to the way we think about the superintendency and the benefits of shifting our mindsets about how best to serve students in our K–12 schools, with leaders as diverse as the students they serve. Critical feminist theory allows

us to open our field of vision and imagine a more inclusive, dynamic, innovative, and experienced individual to serve our students without regard to their race, color, or gender. Instead, by looking at what leaders bring to the table and what the overall benefits are of having a leader that relates to and understands the social, cultural, and environmental identities of the students they serve, we not only open our field of vision, but we open new doors of possibilities for our students and educational systems.

In conclusion, these authentic stories are evidence that when we open our field of vision and broaden our horizons, we see the beauty of a more inclusive, diverse, and open-minded leadership model. Reflecting on the feminist framework of this study, we can see this research looked at women's concerns and practices from everyday life, and in doing so we look at the moral decisions women are left to make (Harding, 2014). This research can provide a foundation from which new perspectives on the future directions of education change can stand in order to inform educators, scholars, and policy makers alike to improve current educational practices, and educate and empower a new generation of school leaders.

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