

Leadership Development through the Study of the Lived Experience

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Reflection of the lived experience occurs in the solitude of leadership and it is through reflection that educational leaders acquire knowledge. A deep dive into the reflections of the lived experience leads to discernment and it is at this intersect that leadership finds wisdom. The rich data of the lived experience can serve as a valuable resource in leadership development but maximizing the value of the analysis of the lived experience necessitates sharing the findings in a manner that builds capacity in the next generation of leaders. The vehicle used to share the findings is as important as the data we draw from experiences that shape our lives and character.

Autoethnography, as a method of research, allows us to generate and share data in meaningful ways and enables researchers and participants to acquire a depth of knowledge comparable to conventional methods. It allows the researcher to use story and testimonio as a vehicle on a journey through data collection and allows us to arrive at a depth of understanding through which we can draw conclusions and contribute to a body of knowledge. This approach employs story and testimonio as powerful tools we can draw on for leadership development and effectiveness. Stories can serve as guideposts for our elders and policymakers in our communities (Brayboy & Dehyle, 2000). Researchers reveal that stories have a place in our communities and our lives because they shape our character, remind us of our origins, and serve as lessons for the younger members of our communities (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2010; Guajardo, Guajardo, Janson and Millitelo, 2016; Romero, 2005; Yosso, 2005; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2009).

Pelias (2003) states that an autoethnography “let’s you use your self to get to culture” and places the self at the center of the study. A deep dive into the lived experience can increase leadership effectiveness and deliver the relevance that allows the learner to achieve cultural awareness and a better understanding of the self. The following are critical leadership functions: a leaders’ understanding of their own identity; how education, culture, upbringing, values and morals helped shape the self (Leary, & Tangney, 2002; Anzaldúa, 2015; and Guajardo & Guajardo, 2017) and how the leader functions as a contributing member of the organization (Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). Capturing the lived experience and making sense of the world around us can help validate who we are as individuals within an organization and may even help us create the conditions in which people change themselves.

Autoethnography as a method of research represents an opportunity to employ the power of story and testimonio in the development of culturally sensitive leadership in the field of education. Demographers hold that by the year 2050, our nation will be increasingly more diverse and that there will be no racial or ethnic majority among the general population of the United States with Hispanics as the main force driving this demographic change (Murdock, 2007; U.S. Census, 2010; America’s Voice, 2014). Gandara and Rumberger (2009) affirm that public schools in the United States have represented “the great equalizer” or the place where assimilation into the mainstream is inculcated, regardless of the culture that students bring to school. This view of an acculturation approach is devoid of the benefits of validating the cultural capital and funds of knowledge that students already possess when they enroll in the public schools. As a result, most immigrant students who enter school as English Learners (EL) have low achievement and attainment (Gandara and Rumberger, 2009; Murdock, 2007, America’s Voice, 2014). As the demographic landscape shifts, how our nation will manage the well documented disparities in education and economic indicators afflicting minorities will continue to be a dilemma facing national leaders tasked with adopting policy solutions (Murdock, 2007, America’s Voice, 2014).

Our ability to help all students succeed in a state that is currently educating a minority-majority necessitates educational leaders with the ability to achieve cultural synchronicity and demonstrate an awareness of the importance of reaching cultural congruence. Given the needs of the students in our

classrooms, a leader must also possess the ability to enhance the social and cultural capital and recognize the resistance that may arise from the pedagogies of the home (Yosso, 2005; and Delgado Bernal, 2001).

The following are excerpts of an autoethnographic study completed recently. It illustrates the power and effectiveness of story and testimonio. The highly personalized accounts of the life of an immigrant whose life journey began south of the Rio Bravo/Rio Grande and continues al otro lado, in the borderlands of South Texas.

Life in the Borderlands

This concept of “al otro lado” [on the other side] was one of those things no one had to explain. You just grew up understanding “al otro lado” from the context of conversations. Geographically, the Rio Bravo/ Rio Grande was an international boundary but in the daily lives of those of us who grew up in la frontera, it amounted to nothing more than part of the landscape. We have relatives on both sides of the river and our lifestyles consisted of an interdependence of the social structure on both sides of the river.

We were living in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico, and making ends meet was difficult. Papá worked for the Coca-Cola bottling company until they announced they would close the plant in Matamoros. He subsequently obtained a work visa “al otro lado” and he was gone all the time. Our abuelos filled the void when papá went to go work “al otro lado”.

My papá had gone to work in the shrimping, a booming industry in the 1970s that drew laborers such as papá. He told us he was a descabezador [header]. He went from deliveryman for Coca-Cola to heading shrimp on *The Scatterd Brain*, a shrimp boat that docked in the Port of Brownsville. The shrimping industry paid well, and it was enough to sustain a family of seven children. There was a trade-off, though. My papá’s hands were suddenly course and he was gone for up to thirty days at a time. He was home for three days, at the most, and gone again. He was our spiritual leader, a disciplinarian, and our role model. When he was away from home, we missed him dearly.

So You are Leaving for La United

During this period my father took up a new job that had things looking up for us. One day, mamá and papá told us we would be leaving our home in Matamoros--we were going to go live al otro lado. A shrimper’s salary, family sacrifices, and a conservative approach to finances helped pool enough money together for a life changing decision. Papá had given a down payment on a wood frame home in the Ebony Heights subdivision. The home was within walking distance of an elementary school, which was important to our parents. Abuelo teased us, “Así que se van para La United?” [So you are leaving for The United?] It was the most he could do to keep himself from sobbing uncontrollably. He and abuela had warmed up to the idea, the noise, the mischief and havoc that accompanied raising the original Magnificent Seven (seven grandchildren) in the addition our grandparents made to their home several years back.

As soon as it was clear that we would be moving to a new home in Brownsville, mamá was true to form and began teaching us what few English words she knew – mostly nouns like “window”, “ta-ble”, “mo-ther”, “fa-ther”. Suddenly, we had become imaginaries, in the borderlands of culture (Saldivar, 2006). It seems somewhat comical now, but it was a crash course in the English language--it did not come close to preparing us for the culture shock that we would experience.

I recall the day our parents loaded the entire family into our station wagon and heading towards the Gateway International Bridge. When we arrived at the immigration offices, we lined up oldest-to-youngest. I recall how cold the whole experience was that day. I do not mean the temperature. Perhaps it was the staff was unfamiliar to us, or we did not know the language, but the process itself was cold and the offices bland. My siblings and I had already received our immunizations. I am not certain if the inoculations were at this same office or a doctor’s office. I remember however, that it was after this visit to the immigration office that we were able to go on these trips to get groceries al otro lado and eventually to our new home in Brownsville. Our mamá now had a set of resident alien cards for each of us that she kept in a fold up wallet and only rolled them out when we crossed the international bridge.

Living in a State of Nepantla

We left our home at Lauro Villar #24 on October of 1974 and moved into a three-bedroom house at 1793 Stanford Avenue, a two-bedroom, one bath wood frame structure with a garage that at some point had been converted to a third bedroom. The entire layout was different from the only home we had ever known. My favorite feature was the large picture window in the living room that let in a good amount of daylight. We had a fenced in back yard that paled in comparison to abuela's garden, but it did have two mature ash trees that provided plenty of shade and somewhat compensated for the change. Abuelo and papá brought the pieces of furniture from our home in Matamoros and that familiarity made the transition a little smoother. As soon as we were settled in, mamá and papá took us to the Gulf-Mart next to the H.E.B on Boca Chica Boulevard and bought us school clothes. We would no longer wear the required uniforms of our school in Mexico, plaid shirts with khaki pants or the white button-down shirts and white pants required for patriotic Mondays. I was looking forward to going to school, but I soon realized that I had not really grasped the concept of why mamá wanted us to learn to speak English. She told us we would have to learn to speak English at our new school, but this did not really register until we attended class on the first day.

I was entering the first grade and was assigned to Ms. Besteiro's class where we sat in rows in individual desks. All of the adults and most of the kids spoke only in English. We started the day reciting the pledge to a flag that was not familiar to me. Kids held their hand flat over their hearts instead of a military style salute. The teacher led the class from the front of the room, and I could not understand what she was saying. The few kids that spoke Spanish either whispered or said nothing most of the day. I spent most of my class time looking around the room feverishly, reading body language as I tried to keep up with my classmates. Even the alphabet displayed across the top of the blackboard in the front of the classroom was different; it was missing letters. I had no idea what was happening. One thing was similar to my school in Matamoros. Recess was the highlight of the day. Still, no one was playing la Rueda de San Miguel or La Vibora de la Mar. I wasted no time, made my way to the swing set, and later discovered what everyone meant by "the monkey bars". No one was selling raspas [snow cones] at the fence (as a street vendor did at my previous school) and although I missed that, we had this amazing playground equipment with slides, swings and monkey bars. Several kids spoke Spanish on the playground and that also made recess special.

I did well on the playground but in the classroom, I was struggling. During reading time, we were placed into groups according to our reading ability. I was either a red bird or a green bird. I know with certainty that I was not a blue bird. I was reading everything phonetically, but the words were not making sense.

See Pug Run. Pug Runs Fast. Run Jane Run.

Ted jumps rope. See Ted jump rope. Jump Ted jump.

I sounded out each letter the way Maestra Raquel in Matamoros had taught me, but I could not comprehend what I was saying. From the illustrations, I knew this much; the story was related to a dog, a boy and a girl. It was frustrating.

Things were strange at home also. We had settled in and we were now living al otro lado in our new home. One night, kids began showing up on our doorstep in costumes. They knocked on the door, held out a bag and said something my siblings and I did not comprehend; it sounded like /trik-e-trit/. We were confused by the entire experience but then mamá explained that there was a holiday in the United States in which children went door to door asking for candy. This holiday was foreign to us, but we were just kids and we liked the concept.

Mamá was expecting a baby again and she still cooked and did house chores as she sang her favorite songs ranchera style. She sang aloud:

Aquellos ojitos verdes ¿dónde se andarán paseando? Ojalá que venga a verme aunque sea de vez en cuando. Ay, ay, ay, ay, ¿Dónde andarán? Esos ojitos que me hicieron suspirar.

As I think back to the passion with which she sang this song, I understand. She was expressing

how much she missed looking into my father's green eyes. We all missed him. Papá spent thirty days offshore and was home for a few days. Even after our youngest sister Andrea was born, he stayed home for a week before he went back out on the shrimp boat. My abuelos visited often. They never arrived empty handed and usually brought with them items that were staples in our home in Matamoros. They brought pan dulce [sweet bread], corn tortillas, and even bottled water. We were now living in La United as my grandfather once teased, and although many things were the same, some of the very significant things in my life were different. We spoke Spanish at home, but we could not do so at school; at least not around our teachers. I have come to understand it now. I was living in a state of nepantla struggling to find my cultural identity (Anzaldúa, 1987; Hurtado & Gurin, 2004). My blood still boiled when I heard México's national anthem on Spanish television or Spanish radio stations, but I was now pledging allegiance to a different flag. Who was I? What was happening? Our world was changing. The state of confusion grew deeper as time went on.

As I moved through the grade levels, I was beginning to pick up more English. Each school year, teachers at Ebony Heights Elementary were more adamant about not allowing us to speak Spanish. On several occasions, speaking Spanish resulted in one of my teachers asking me to stand put my hand out towards her. I remember how she laid a 12" wooden ruler on the back of my hand, lifted it, and swatted it down to strike me. I was in the fourth grade when my teacher made me hold up a dictionary in each hand and asked me to raise and hold my arms up away from my body for what seemed like an eternity. Spanish was the language of poetry and the arts; it was the language of my abuelos and my padres. The entire thing was nothing more than hypocrisy. Speaking Spanish throughout the school day resulted in punishment but as the month of February drew near, students were highly encouraged to participate in the Charro Days festivities. This celebration of culture is an annual event celebrated since 1938 in the city of Brownsville, Texas during the latter part of the month of February to commemorate the Mexican heritage and the relationship that exists between the Mexican and American sides of the Rio Grande.

When my siblings and I reached a conversational proficiency level in English, things became even more convoluted. At the Salazar household, speaking English in the presence of those who did not understand it was considered ill mannered.

*“En esta casa van a hablar Español. ¿Qué falta de respeto es ese?
¿Cómo van a estar hablando en inglés delante de sus padres y sus abuelos?”
[You will speak Spanish in this house. What lack of respect is that? How can
you be speaking English in the presence of your parents and grandparents?]*

It was as though we were living a double life. I did not feel deeply rooted in either culture for a long time. We did not know it at the time, but the circumstances were forcing us to develop what Anzaldúa (1987) referred to as the mestiza-like consciousness. Circumstances warranted going in and out of both cultures and between languages. Everything was contingent on the situation or location. In time, I came to accept this as the new norm. It was only after I came to terms with this, that I was able to indulge in the best of both worlds. I was an academic tourist in the borderlands of culture (Saldivar 2006; and Pelias, 2003).

The Year the Olympics Were Held in Mexico

I was only a child and had no idea what mamá was implying when she said, “No se te olvide que naciste el año de las Olimpiadas en México.” [“Remember, you were born the year that the Olympics were held in Mexico.”]

The first time she mentioned it was when she was teaching me the lines to a poem but then she reminded me of this several more times throughout my young life. I had no idea what it meant and dismissed it to turn my attention to all the things that kids my age would rather do with their time. I was in middle school when I decided to look up the 1968 Olympics. My mother was no longer making reference to this event, but after all those years, I was still curious. I was in the library of Stell Middle School when I reached for an encyclopedia and learned that the XIX Olympiad was important for several reasons. It was the first time that track was run on an all-weather surface instead of the traditional cinder surface. It was the first Olympiad held in a Spanish speaking

country and the platform that Tommie Smith and John Carlos, two track athletes from the U.S.A., chose to protest the oppression that African Americans had endured. Standing on the platform, receiving their respective medals, they each raised a black-gloved fist; a gesture symbolizing black power. Their gesture was an attempt to communicate to the world the oppression that had been at the center of the Civil Rights Movement in America.

It was a moment that had a ripple effect throughout the U.S.A. and across the globe. An event that would be etched in history and in the minds of those that lived through that era. As I read through the encyclopedia, I realized that my mother was attempting to use that event to inspire me to deliver a passionate presentation of the poem “Los colores de las razas” [The Color of Races] during an event at La Plaza Municipal Theatre in Matamoros. It was then that I understood she was drawing inspiration from this event and that she was attempting to transmit that to me. It is these moments suspended in time in which our parents transmit knowledge, values, an appreciation for the arts through the pedagogies of the home. Reading through that encyclopedia helped me realize that others had endured much more than the state of confusion that I was experiencing, and I had a better understanding of the meaning of the poem.

I was not sure what had changed. It was in middle school that I began to realize teachers did not seem as concerned about students speaking Spanish. Still, there was something rather ironic about the middle school experience. I had reached a level of proficiency in which I was more fluent in English, and now the school curriculum required that I take Spanish as a foreign language.

The Joy of Music and the Generosity of a Classmate

The school band program nurtured an appreciation for the arts and opened up a new world of opportunities for my siblings and me. We could not afford to purchase an instrument and our band director knew it. Papá had an injury on a shrimp boat and this marked the beginning of a financial downturn for our family. Our band director had each of us try out for brass and woodwind instruments that the school provided. Martha played the bassoon, Felipe played the baritone, I played the tuba, Rosie played the oboe, Claudia and Andrea played the trumpet while Ricardo and Sotera pursued other interests. It was loud around the house as we were often practicing different sheet music. I am not sure how our parents put up with it. We traveled with the band program throughout the Rio Grande Valley for performances and competitions and even went to Six Flags. It is difficult to explain but this was a big deal for us because we had never been out of the Valley.

There were times when we went hungry at these events because our parents could not afford to give us money to buy a snack; we just did not have the means. Once at Six Flags in San Antonio, when Mike Maza, a trumpet player in the symphonic band approached me as I watched from a distance as everyone made their purchases at concessions. He asked if I was hungry and offered to buy me a meal. I have never forgotten his kind gesture and compassion. He was my classmate but that day, he was a blessing to me. I still pray for God’s blessings over Mike.

Making the All-Valley band and competing in the Pigskin Jubilee or the City of Palms Concert, site reading, ensemble or concert band competitions was a great experience for us. Each time we put on the band uniform we shed the clothing of poverty. For the brief moments that we were competing, we were equal. We were only being compared by ability and according to the skills developed through hours of practice. We brought home medals and ribbons for site reading, for placing First Chair All Valley and Division I ensemble competitions. My mother was proud, and she told stories of our success to anyone who was willing to listen. She displayed the medals over the console television in our living room. Whenever anyone visited, she showed them awards, told of our achievements, and she embellished. We blushed as she held up medals that were clearly labeled All Valley Band Competition and told our relatives that we were competing at the state level. It was her way of letting us know that she valued our achievements and her way of communicating high expectations. We had too much respect for her to correct her in the presence of our guests. Our participation in the band made the talent portion of the annual Christmas Program that Abuela Rosita hosted on Christmas Eve each year even better. We loaded our instruments into my father’s station wagon and crossed into Matamoros to our grandparent’s home. Our grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins cheered us on as we played solos and ensembles. We created many memories and it was at these

family gatherings that we forgot of all the struggles and where we appreciated being part of a large family.

Conclusion

The excerpts of this autoethnographic study provide insights into the lived experience of an immigrant in south Texas who once found himself in a state of *nepantla*, a term in Nahuatl used by the indigenous people of Mexico that represents a concept of living between two cultures. The essence of the story captured here plays out repeatedly in the lived experience of students in classrooms throughout our nation.

Twenty-one-million elementary and secondary students of immigrant families were enrolled in the nation's public schools in October of 2016, representing 26% of all students (U.S. Census, 2017). As demographics continue to shift across Texas and the nation, the effectiveness of culturally congruent leadership and the degree to which we are willing to achieve cultural synchronicity between organizational leaders and the community of learners will have an impact on the academic experience and overall success of the students we serve. It is clear that education in a democratic society will continue to have a special place and purpose but if we are to succeed, educational leaders cannot continue to operate under deficit thinking. Educational leaders must possess the ability to recognize the importance of validating the social and cultural capital of every student and the resistance that may arise from the pedagogies of the home.

The research study suggests that staff in school districts serving a minority or diverse population of students would benefit from professional development that increases the awareness of the benefits of culturally congruent teaching. When children enroll in school, they arrive with a wealth of cultural capital and funds of knowledge. We must work with a moral imperative to create opportunities for children to share their stories and what their journey has taught them. We should encourage students to use narrative and language to arrive at a better understanding of the self. We should also be prepared to share our stories with them because it is at this juncture, that we can help them know the self. We must work with a moral imperative to validate the language and culture, morals and values of every student so that no child in our classrooms resides in an in between state of *nepantla*. This will allow us to create meaningful relationships with our students. It is how we can improve teaching and learning, strengthen the fiber of a democratic society and improve the human condition.

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