

2017-01-01

# Agent of Social Capital: An Autoethnographic Study of a First Time Superintendent

Juan I. Martinez

University of Texas at El Paso, jimartinez3@miners.utep.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open\\_etd](https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd)



Part of the [Educational Administration and Supervision Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Martinez, Juan I., "Agent of Social Capital: An Autoethnographic Study of a First Time Superintendent" (2017). *Open Access Theses & Dissertations*. 495.

[https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open\\_etd/495](https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd/495)

AGENT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF A FIRST TIME  
SUPERINTENDENT

JUAN I. MARTINEZ

Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership and Administration

APPROVED:

---

Angus Shiva Mungal, Ph.D., Chair

---

Rodolfo Rincones, Ph.D.

---

Elena Izquierdo, Ph.D.

---

David DeMatthews, Ph.D.

---

Don Schulte, Ed.D

---

Charles Ambler, Ph.D.  
Dean of the Graduate School

Copyright ©

by

Juan I. Martinez

2017

## **Dedication**

It is with great honor that I dedicate this dissertation to my family: My wife of twenty-three years, and my two wonderful children. They were the reason, and my inspiration when I decided to pursue a doctoral degree. I enjoyed their “silly” comments throughout the process. Things such as “Dad, you will never finish if you keep looking for shoes in the Internet when you are supposed to be writing” or “Dad, I’ll be finishing high school and college and you will still be writing your dissertation.” In the final analysis, they were the strongest supporters. They made sacrifices and picked up the pieces that I neglected while engrossed in schoolwork. This work would have never been accomplished without your love and support. It is my greatest joy and satisfaction to share this accomplishment with you.

I also dedicate this work to my mother and my grandmother. It was their dedication to my brothers and me, that made me the person I am today. I am eternally grateful for your love and incredible sacrifice.

AGENT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF A FIRST  
TIME SUPERINTENDENT

by

JUAN I. MARTINEZ, BA, M.Ed.

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
The University of Texas at El Paso  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Educational Leadership and Foundations  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

December 2017

## Acknowledgements

It is with sincere gratitude that I extend my appreciation to my dissertation chair, Dr. Angus Shiva Mungal, who dedicated an enormous amount of time guiding me along this long journey. Thank you for not giving up on me. I am forever grateful for your kindness, frankness, and support during difficult times. Most of all thank you for your genuine understanding. As we say in Spanish “Muchas Gracias.”

I wish to acknowledge and sincerely thank Dr. Don Schulte. As a former superintendent, Dr. Schulte was instrumental in guiding me and advising me in the completion of this project. With my deepest gratitude and humility, thank you Dr. Schulte.

I would also like to give special thanks to the members of my dissertation committee. Your individual contributions and expertise played an invaluable role in the successful completion of this project. I express my sincere appreciation to you Dr. Rodolfo Rincones, Dr. Elena Izquierdo, and Dr. David DeMatthews.

Once again, I want to thank my family for their unwavering support. After graduation, I will be able to come out of “the cave” (my home office) and spend more time with you. I know that I would have never accomplished this goal without you.

Finally, I would like to thank the students of my school district. They are a constant source of inspiration and the underlying motivation to continue the mission of advocating on your behalf.

## **Abstract of the Dissertation**

This autoethnography analyzes how my experiences growing up on the Mexico-United States border influenced my superintendency. My particular focus was on my role as an agent of social capital for all students, including low-socioeconomic, at-risk and minority students. Collectively, over fifty percent of school-aged children in the United States are now from a minority ethnic group, of which Hispanic/Latino students constitute the vast majority. Research on academically successful minority students suggests that the social capital students receive from institutional agents at school expands opportunities for academic and lifelong success. Traditionally, however, institutional agents are teachers, counselors, and social workers, not superintendents. From the self-analysis of a practicing superintendent in a school district of approximately twelve thousand students, this study finds that the superintendent can be an agent of social capital that can support access to institutional and community resources, programs and services for students.

Findings from this study challenges the traditional expectations of the superintendent and provides an alternative narrative to the view where the superintendent of schools is perceived as the distant figure, the big boss who is detached from the personal and educational experiences of students. The author attempts to illuminate a different image of the superintendent by narrating his personal and emotional interactions with students in an attempt to assist and advocate on their behalf. This dissertation will describe the superintendent's key role as an empowering agent of social capital when willingly positioned in direct contact with and in the network of students.

## Table of Contents

Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	v
Abstract of the Dissertation .....	vi
Table of Contents.....	vii
List of Tables .....	xii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
The Illegitimate Son.....	1
Purpose of the Study .....	6
Background to the Problem .....	6
Significance of the Study.....	7
Practical and Intellectual Goals .....	10
Research Questions.....	11
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	13
Overview of Literature.....	13
The Historical Role of the Superintendent.....	13
Teacher-scholar.....	17
Business manager.....	18
Educational statesmen.....	20
Applied social scientist .....	21
Communicator.....	24
Social Capital and the Superintendency .....	27
Social Capital.....	28
Institutional Agents.....	33
In the Students' Network .....	36
A New Role of the Superintendent .....	37
The Autoethnography .....	39
Chapter 3: Methodology .....	49
Why autoethnography? .....	50

Site Description.....	52
Data Collection .....	52
Data Analysis.....	60
Limitations.....	61
Chapter 4: The Journey Continues.....	64
Introduction.....	64
High School Years.....	65
La Serna High School – Whittier, California.....	65
El Paso High School – El Paso, Texas.....	67
Back to California: The Beginning of my Work and Spiritual Life .....	67
Living conditions .....	67
Confronting the vices of the real world .....	68
Finding purpose in the church.....	68
Higher Education and Love .....	69
Becoming Superintendent.....	70
Early Experiences of My Superintendency.....	72
Regaining trust: Managing the fallout from a finance equity lawsuit .....	72
Defining my role as superintendent .....	73
Antonio: My first encounter with a student as superintendent .....	74
Committing to authentically and actively connecting with students .....	76
Maria: A cry for hope .....	78
Maria prompts a review of student retention policy .....	79
Revisiting the lawsuit controversy.....	80
Finance equity: Analyzing the numbers .....	81
Finance equity: Explaining the facts.....	82
Authentic engagement with students: Evidence of success.....	82
The alternative school.....	83
Finding a solution .....	84
Resistance to change.....	84
Applying the principles of social capital to the alternative school experience...86	
School culture, band instruments and landscaping: A multifaceted job.....	87
Student voices raised to change a school’s culture.....	88

Students question the removal of a coach.....	89
Diana and the pursuit of better band instruments .....	89
Student voices raised to acquire improved facilities and landscaping.....	90
Exposing Students to a Wider World.....	92
Ramon's story.....	92
Showing students the world beyond .....	93
Chromebook and Wi-Fi initiatives.....	93
Gut Wrenching Issues .....	94
Nathan's story .....	95
Good comes from Nathan's story .....	95
Never Turn the Other Way .....	96
Getting Students to the Stage.....	97
Marco's challenge.....	97
Jose and Arturo: Making it to the finish line .....	98
Motivating sisters: Connecting with a business mindset .....	101
The fruit of these interactions .....	102
Leading the homeless and abandoned to the stage .....	102
The Ultimate Tragedy .....	103
Martin.....	103
Christopher.....	104
Another student passes away .....	104
Consoling a grieving school community .....	105
From Backlash to Acceptance .....	106
Something to Cheer About: The Bond Issue Passes.....	109
Bound For Success: Promoting College Attendance.....	111
Partnership with the University of Texas at El Paso.....	111
Career and technology certification initiative.....	112
Paid internship for college bound students .....	112
Pomp and circumstance: Enhanced graduation ceremonies .....	113
Send off to college gala.....	114
Conclusion .....	115
Concern with Better Living .....	117

Chapter 5: Discussion, Findings & Reflection .....	119
Introduction.....	119
Revisiting the Problem.....	121
Salient Themes.....	122
Creating a culture of change .....	122
Reaching out to students .....	124
Engaging school administrators.....	124
Vital first steps .....	126
My role as an institutional agent.....	127
Breaking down barriers.....	129
Stewardship.....	130
Service.....	133
Supporting change .....	135
Resistance to change.....	138
Resistance to Policy .....	140
Reviewing policy and change.....	143
Retention of students.....	145
Addressing the needs of low socioeconomic status and minority students .....	148
District initiatives to help students.....	148
Exploring the family dynamic .....	151
Understanding the financial burden of students.....	152
Self-reflections.....	155
Purpose and spirituality.....	159
Overarching Themes.....	161
Leaving a legacy: Institutionalizing change .....	161
A leader evokes the past to inspire the future .....	163
Complexities of lifting up the disadvantaged .....	165
List of Major Findings Aligned to Research Questions.....	167
Research question 1: Findings .....	168
Research question 2: Findings .....	168
Research question 3: Findings .....	171
Implications for Practice and Recommendations .....	173
Suggestions for Future Research .....	175

Final Reflections .....	176
References.....	178
Vitae.....	192

## **List of Tables**

Six Primary Roles Associated with the Superintendency.....	17
--	----

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

*“Autoethnography begins with a personal story, in this case, my story...”*

(Wall, 2008, p. 39)

### **The Illegitimate Son**

Words carry the power to uplift us to believe, to dream, and inspire us to pursue the prospect of a better future and the courage to move forward. Conversely, words can also hold the weight to submerge us into a life of despair or a state of dysfunction. Such power and weight are perhaps most poignant when the words are uttered by a member of your own family; your own father. His words would affect me in positive and negative ways, yet they ultimately motivated me pursue and to accomplish a successful career as a public-school administrator.

I was born in the small and desolate mining town of Magistral del Oro in the northern state of Durango, Mexico. Unpaved dusty roads and abandoned crumbling adobe houses make up this small town. Magistral had been a booming mining town until the mine closed down around the time of my birth. When this sole industry ceased to operate, most people moved out, leaving behind many empty houses. With time, many houses simply collapsed and the site became mostly a deserted ghost town. My grandmother and a few other families stayed; they had nowhere else to go and could not afford to move out.

Around the time of the mine shut down, my mother and father separated. She was two months pregnant. According to the custom and tradition of the town, any child born without a father was considered an “illegitimate” child and was not entitled to carry the father’s last name. Three months after my birth, my mother returned to Texas. I was left behind in Magistral, along with two older brothers, in the care of my maternal grandmother.

I grew up in extreme poverty. Running water, electricity, television, and telephone was not part of my household amenities. For most of my elementary and middle school years, my “wardrobe” consisted of a few pants, some t-shirts and a pair of shoes. My grandmother said I always liked to dress well while growing up, so I looked with anticipation for my mother to visit us from Texas because she brought new clothes for me. Mother also brought pancake mix and syrup! At least once a year, I ate something different and delicious for breakfast. While at home we celebrated the traditional holidays of the town; there were no gifts for Christmas or birthdays, except when mother visited from Texas.

Magistral did not have a middle school, only an elementary school, which offered grades one through six. After I finished elementary school, I attended a middle school that was located approximately four miles away in the larger town of Santa Maria on the other side of the mountains. My grandmother usually got up at four in the morning to prepare breakfast and pack lunch for school. Without any other mode of transportation, I walked across the mountainous terrain very early in the morning to make it on time for school.

Eventually, my grandmother decided to relocate so that I did not have to get up so early in the morning and walk across the mountain to go to middle school. My grandmother did not own a house or property in my hometown, or anywhere else for that matter. We lived in the abandoned houses of Magistral and, depending on the condition of the house, we moved frequently to avoid maintenance costs. Moving to another town was not easy for me but I have warm memories of growing up and my hometown was a very special place.

Magistral was the place where my grandmother taught me countless lessons that helped shape the person I am today. For example, one day while walking back from school I found a brown wallet with one hundred pesos in it. There was no form of identification in the billfold.

When I arrived home, I gave the wallet to my grandmother. Without hesitation, she placed it on top of the old “trastero” (cupboard cabinet) and said: “go around town and ask if anybody lost the wallet.” Since I could not locate the owner, she instructed me to ask people who passed by or drove through if they lost a wallet. Asking drivers was safe since conditions of the rocky roads made it impossible to speed up beyond five miles per hour. There was no question we needed the money but grandmother insisted it was not ours. Almost a year passed and finally, she decided to use the money. Unfortunately, the peso devaluated and the one hundred pesos were not worth much anymore.

Subconsciously or consciously, throughout my adult life, I have always carried a brown wallet. The brown wallet reminds me of the lesson my grandmother wanted to teach me: honesty and integrity. My grandmother also taught me the value of working. She insisted I had to learn to work for the “honor of serving others” not for the “pursuit of money.” She instilled in me the belief of service to the community. Every summer she sent me to work with one of the local farmers. Grandmother did not allow him to pay me. I objected to my grandmother’s request but I always complied. I had no choice. My grandmother only accepted the small bag of corn or beans I collected at the end of the day to bring home.

My grandmother’s practical and simple lessons became ingrained in me and have inspired me throughout my life. I certainly wish she were alive today. She was without a doubt the most wonderful human being I have ever known.

When I graduated from middle school with no other alternative or the prospect of a productive life, my mother informed my grandmother that my father requested I go live with him in Whittier, California. My grandmother reluctantly agreed, but I could feel her sadness. I know it pained her deeply, but she would not cry in front of me. She projected a strong agreement with

my departure, although lovingly contrived so that I would not refuse to leave her alone. In the small house where we lived, however, it was easy to hear her late at night in agony as she prayed and sobbed.

At the end of the summer, I went to live with my father, his wife, and his children in Whittier, California. What a culture shock! To make matters worse, I did not speak English. I arrived in Whittier just a few days before the beginning of the school year. One of my half brothers attended California High School and my other brother attended La Serna High School. On the first day of school, my father drove us to La Serna High School. When we arrived, he simply dropped us off in front of the school. He did not bother to escort me in for registration. I assumed my father expected my brother to help me, which did not happen.

I got out of the car and walked towards the school, practically trembling with fear and insecurity. My brother went to his classes with his friends. I sat on a bench waiting for him to return. I was confused, not knowing what to do, where to go, or who to talk to. I did not speak English and I did not know anyone. I avoided eye contact with everyone who passed by. I had never felt so lonely and helpless. Approximately twenty minutes had passed when I looked up and panicked when I saw a tall white man walking towards me. When he arrived where I was sitting, he shook my hand, smiled, and said something in English. I did not understand what he said, of course, and I simply uttered the words: “No English.” He replied in Spanish gently offering: “Yo hablo Español.” I do not remember what else he said, but I never forgot what he did. He took me to the office, registered me, walked me around the school, welcomed me to the campus and took me to my first science class with Ms. Evans.

Ms. Evans was the most wonderful teacher to me. Ms. Evans was from Spain and I was fascinated with her Spanish accent. How I wish I could see her again to thank her for caring so

much for me at that critical time in my life. At lunchtime, I met with my brother in the school cafeteria. When I saw the man, who registered me standing by one of the lunch lines, I asked my brother who he was. “The principal,” he replied. My first instinct was to go and thank him, but I was too embarrassed to say anything.

As the year progressed, I did not feel I belonged with my father and his family, but I accepted the fact that I had no other option. I found refuge at school with new friends and by joining after-school activities. Most school days, I would extend my time on campus to avoid returning home. I purposely missed the activity school bus after soccer practice and walked the three miles home to avoid arriving home too early.

Eventually, I moved to El Paso, TX, to live with my mother, only to return to California after my high school graduation. My second experience back in California would be even more challenging than the first. Feeling lost, confused and without a sense of purpose, I joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church where I found the inspiration to attend college. After three years in California, I moved back to El Paso with the sole purpose of going to college.

The circumstances of these early events of my new life in the United States helped to shape my outlook and the way I see my life. Having a principal, a pastor, a teacher, and a friend take the time to counsel, mentor and help me navigate my early adulthood impacted the way I see my role as a superintendent of schools today. I explore these later events and instances in Chapter Four.

Here, I presented an insight into my experiences growing up and transitioning into an adult, and more importantly, transitioning into a superintendent of schools, which allowed me to reflect on my life experience and use it in ways that benefit the students that I am privileged to

serve. It is this view of my lived experiences that I approach my role as superintendent, particularly in helping and advocating for students who need it most.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this autoethnography was to examine and understand my role as a superintendent of schools. The study examined my experiences, practices, beliefs, and complexities as I strived to become an agent of social capital for students. An autoethnography allowed me to be the primary focus and placed me at the center of the study where my “own feelings and experiences were incorporated into the story and considered as vital data for understanding the social world being observed” (Anderson, 2010, p. 12).

Key to this research was the understanding of my role as an agent of social capital for all students in general and low socioeconomic, minority students in particular. This study describes my role as an agent of social capital when willingly positioned in the network of students. I used the concept of social capital to interact with students and become part of their understand their needs and find ways to help them. At the same time, my actions on behalf of students helped me to define and understand better my role as superintendent of schools. This study documents one superintendent who put in place efforts to connect directly with students and to give the students a voice in their education and to understand the role of a superintendent of schools has as an agent of social capital.

### **Background to the Problem**

The historical role of the superintendent of schools has been one of constant change. Much of this change, sometimes driven from outside the profession and sometimes from within, helped to shape the fundamental role of the superintendent of schools as known today. However, despite years of developmental progress towards a clear conceptualization of the role of the

superintendent, time and context have influenced how these roles are understood (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Cooper & Fusarelli, 2002; Kowalski, 1999). Some argue that all roles overlap and are relevant to modern practice, while others relegate the role to a specific and dominant function associated with a particular period of time (Kowalski, 2001; Sharp & Walter, 2004). Others argue that the role of the superintendent derives from an amalgamation of roles over time in response to a continued unfolding of economic, social, technological, and political factors (Björk, Browne-Ferrigno, & Kowalski, 2014). Yet others see it somewhat as a generalist, having working knowledge in a variety of areas such as finance, personnel, facilities, public relations, collective bargaining, curriculum and instruction, and many other areas (Sharp & Walter, 2004).

Historically, the superintendent is seen as a distant manager removed from the daily realities and challenges students encounter in schools. Researchers observed that the superintendent of schools spends less than half of one percent of their time in conversation with students (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). Not surprisingly, the superintendent is not perceived as a source of social capital for students in any of the role conceptualizations historically attributed to the superintendency.

### **Significance of the Study**

Superintendents have always been viewed as the top administrators, dealing with board-wide issues, and putting out media and personnel fires. The significance of the study is that superintendents have always been in positions of power and authority but rarely seen as an institutional agent situated in the students' social network. This study looks at one superintendent through a different lens, that of an agent of social capital for all students in general and low-socioeconomic, minority students in particular.

The concept of social capital is perhaps broadly illustrated with the familiar aphorism, “it’s not what you know, it’s who you know” (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000, p. 31). In the context of this study, social capital consists of “resources and key forms of social support embedded in one’s network or associations, and accessible through direct or indirect ties with institutional agents” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1067), in this case, the superintendent of schools. This general definition of social capital is further explored in Chapter Two of this study.

The impetus for change and adaptation of new roles for the superintendent of schools, albeit slow, has been mostly in response to external factors such as federal and state legislation, litigation, and change in social and economic conditions that challenged the traditional mission of public schools and by derivation the role of the superintendent (Kowalski, 1999). For the contemporary superintendent, the job is “becoming more complex and demanding” (Boyland & Ellis, 2015, p. 23). In educational reform, for example, the landmark *No Child Left Behind* Act of 2001 (NCLB), punctuated the traditional roles of the superintendent of schools in unprecedented ways. NCLB forced superintendents to operate under an environment of prescriptive regulations and stiff penalties and to adopt new roles to meet high-stakes testing standards. Failure to meet state or federal requirements could prove disastrous for a superintendent, both at the professional level and personal level as well. The pressure, in some cases, led superintendents, along with principals, teachers, and other educators, to be accused, tried and convicted of falsifying test scores, racketeering, fraud and cheating for personal financial gain (Mellon, 2013; Vogell, 2011; Zubrzycki, 2012). In addition to the challenges brought about by federal and state test-driven accountability systems, increasingly diverse student populations with unique needs are elevating the complexity of the superintendent’s job.

The latest census data also shows that the high school dropout rate for Hispanics declined by 21.8 percentage points from 1990 to 2015. Hispanics, however, are twice more likely to drop out of school (10.6 percent) than their White student counterparts (5.2%) (NCSE, 2016). This shift in enrollment coupled with socioeconomic status, language, and drop out rates for minority students in public schools underscores the importance of school administrators, particularly superintendents, to adapt to this new reality and expand their role and practice. The superintendent of schools must also adapt to this new reality and embrace a new role, that is, as an agent of social capital for students in general and low-socioeconomic and minority students in particular. As an agent of social capital, the superintendent is uniquely positioned in the community to connect and introduce students to external resources, educational institutions and programs, and services existing in the broader community to benefit students. Internally, the superintendent has the authority to mobilize the district's financial resources to initiate and implement educational programs, mentoring initiatives, intervention strategies, and a host of other services to build social capital for students. Similarly, the superintendent has the authority to influence, set the tone, work cooperatively with, direct, support, coach, and influence administrators and other school personnel to alter relationships, expectations, commitments, and outcomes that benefit, empower and expand the volume of social capital available for students.

The prominence of the role of the superintendent as a social scientist, albeit in various forms over five decades, coupled with the change in student demographics and disparities in income, harbingers to a reconceptualization of the role of the superintendent of schools as a builder of social capital. The significance of this study relies on the imperative need of reconceptualizing the role of the superintendent as an agent of social capital for all students in general and low-socioeconomic, minority students in particular. As noted above, the

superintendent plays a vital role as an empowering agent of social capital to students who in turn are given access to institutional resources and support (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

### **Practical and Intellectual Goals**

The goal of this research was to examine and understand the role of a school superintendent as an agent of social capital for all students and low socioeconomic, minority students in particular. This autoethnography served to contextualize the conventional expectations of my work as superintendent and attempted to redefine it in a manner that was meaningful and relevant and that rendered the greatest benefit to students. I expanded the traditional views of what the role of the superintendent is to embrace elements of what the superintendency could be. As an agent of social capital for students, the superintendent is the highest-ranking official of a school district who, by willingly positioning himself or herself in the network of students, is able to provide students direct and indirect access to resources and social support embedded in the school district and outside associations of the superintendent (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

I did not intend to determine what works and what does not in terms of academic success for students; rather, this study blended elements of evocative and analytic autoethnography to explore my role as superintendent of schools. I provided an in-depth explanation of my role as the superintendent of schools for a district with a majority of low socioeconomic, at-risk and minority students. I provided an analysis of the role I played as an agent of social capital for students and communicated it in a form that may help other school administrators, especially new superintendents, to understand their role in building social capital for all students and low-socioeconomic, minority students in particular.

## Research Questions

There is very little research on superintendents as agents of social capital for students. Much of the research on the superintendent tends to focus on managerial duties of schools, the central office, and general leadership qualities, conflict resolution, board relations, educational reform, traits of successful superintendents, and similar topics. It is essential to understand and explore the role of the superintendent in light of the changes in demographics and recent research that points to the fundamental importance of social capital in the experience of minority school children (Gonzalez, 2013; Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003; Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

The intended purpose of this autoethnographic approach was to explore key events in my life that influenced or propelled me to understand my role as an agent of social capital as a superintendent of schools serving predominately minority and economically disadvantaged student populations. This form of study allows the researcher the use of “sensitive issues and inner-most thoughts [making] this research method a powerful and unique tool for individual and social understanding” (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010, p. 18). With such understanding in mind, I developed, as Denzin and Lincoln (2005) put it, “questions of self and culture” (p. 423). Accordingly, the overarching questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. What experiences have influenced my role as a superintendent who views himself as an agent of social capital for all students in general and low-socioeconomic, minority students in particular?
2. What are the key practices, beliefs, and complexities for me as a superintendent striving to become an agent of social capital for students?
3. What insights can other superintendents gain from this study?

This study may benefit researchers and administrators who are exploring the role of the superintendency and suggest a more interactive role with students whose voices may be marginalized in the decision making of the superintendent of schools. This study also presented ways in which superintendents can engage directly with students, parents, teachers, and administrators to bring about change in the traditional role of the superintendent.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

*The potential power of autoethnography to address unanswered questions and include the new and unique ideas of the researcher is inspiring to me as one who wishes to find my niche and make my own special contribution (Wall, 2006, p. 4).*

### **Overview of Literature**

I designed my autoethnography as a highly personal story. This type of study placed me in the center of the research as the sole participant. The center of the investigation was my own story, my own lived experience, and I was the “subject” being researched. This chapter provides a review of the literature on (a) the historical role of the superintendent, (b) social capital, (c) institutional agents, and (d) autoethnography. Included in this review, I examined the evolution of the superintendent as the role both changed and embraced the concepts of teacher-scholar, business manager, educational statesmen, applied social scientist and communicator. The review of existing literature relevant to this study was necessary in order to provide a general understanding of the historical and contemporary role of school superintendents, the concept of social capital, and the role of institutional agents.

### **The Historical Role of the Superintendent**

The role of the superintendent of schools has changed and evolved over time. Historical milestones have helped shape the fundamental role of this top leadership position as known today. The prevailing conceptions throughout history include the role of teacher-scholar, business manager, educational statesman, social scientist and communicator (Björk, Glass, & Brunner, 2005). These conceptualizations depict the broad evolution and understanding of the role of the superintendent of schools throughout history. The characteristics and differences of local school districts have also influenced the superintendent’s behavior and have helped frame the practice and role of the superintendent of schools just as much as the broader influences have (Kowalski, 2011).

In looking at the historical development of the role of the superintendent of schools, it became evident that since the inception of the position in the 1800's, the superintendent's role has always been in a state of flux. However, the pace of such evolution has been slow. The earliest conceptualization of the role of the superintendent as teacher-scholar endured from the 1850's to the early 1900's, before it diverged into a new role. The same is true for all subsequent role conceptualizations of the superintendency (Petersen & Barnett, 2005).

By the 1980's the role of the superintendent evolved yet again in response to the federal report entitled, *A Nation at Risk*. This report formed the foundation for subsequent education policy at the federal level. Unfortunately, resulting reforms effectively moved educational decisions as far as possible from American classrooms. In 1989, for example, the educational summit convened by then-president George Bush excluded educators and consisted entirely of state governors who established national performance goals for education (Ansary, 2007; Petersen & Barnett, 2005). Ironically (or purposely), *A Nation at Risk* and associated school reform efforts basically ignored the role of the superintendent. Harvard's Jerome Murphy observed, "the school superintendent has really been the forgotten player in the game of school reform" (as cited in Norton, et al. 1996, p. 29). During this era, much of the literature also "blamed the ills of education on superintendents, who were seen as thwarting change, rather than being innovators for improvement" (Petersen & Barnett, 2005, p. 108). As a result, superintendents were challenged to evolve yet again and forced to build political coalitions and "support from other stakeholders, and develop strategic plans for school improvement" (Petersen & Barnett, 2005, p. 108).

By 2001 the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) was adopted with strong bipartisan support. NCLB enforcement included holding individual schools and districts accountable for

student academic performance primarily based on high stakes standardized testing. NCLB mandated schools, and by derivation the superintendent, to implement “scientifically based research to guide their decisions about which interventions to implement” (United States Department of Education, 2003, p. iii). The realities of NCLB, with its strong emphasis on accountability, propelled the resurgence of the role of the superintendents as an applied social scientist with new demands and expectations—“to use scientifically based research to determine what works and what does not” (Fusarelli, B.C. & Fusarelli, L.D., 2005, p. 188). The district’s chief executive was also expected to know how to use data to drive decision-making and identify deleterious obstacles to student achievement and improve instruction (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). NCLB’s greater emphasis on high stakes testing and greater accountability attempted to assert stronger federal influence on public schools. Thus, calls for the role of the superintendent to evolve from a managerial leader to social scientist and instructional leader abounded (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2005).

The inception of NCLB fueled the reemergence of the role as a social scientist as the dominant function and expectation of the contemporary superintendent. NCLB required superintendents and other school administrators to have “considerable knowledge of testing, data analysis, and interpretation to successfully sustain enduring efforts to improve schooling” to drive decision-making (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2005, p. 194). The role expectations under NCLB made it clear that “superintendents in the 21st Century will need to know more and do more” (Kowalski, 2001, p. 192). No longer was the position of the superintendent perceived as the benevolent and symbolic leader, but rather as the active interventionist accountable for educating all children to proficiency (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2005).

The historical evidence, however, suggests a substantial disagreement among scholars of the role of the superintendent (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Cooper & Fusarelli, 2002; Kowalski, 1999). Some argue that all roles overlap and are relevant to modern practice while others relegate the role to a specific and dominant function associated with a particular period of time (Kowalski, 2001; Sharp & Walter, 2004). Others argue that the role of the superintendent draws from an amalgamation of roles over time in response to a continued unfolding of economic, social, technological, and political factors (Björk et al., 2014). Yet others see it somewhat as a generalist or multirole, having working knowledge in a variety of areas such as finance, personnel, facilities, public relations, collective bargaining, curriculum and instruction, and many other areas, “pertinent to all or nearly all roles” (Björk, Kowalski, & Browne-Ferrigno, 2005, p. 78).

The role of the superintendent has taken a greater meaning over the past hundred years. Since the inception of the position of superintendent in the late 1830s, the superintendent’s role continues to evolve in complexity and difficulty, becoming more extensive and demanding (Brown et al., 2007; Kowalski, 2005a). According to Björk, Glass and Brunner (2005), historians have identified the four dominant stages in the development and evolution of the position: teacher-scholar (1850 to early 1900’s), business manager (early 1900’s to 1930), educational statesmen or democratic political leader (1930 to mid-1950’s) and applied social scientist (mid-1950’s to 1977). Each role was also influenced at the local level, depending on the composition of the school district and the personal philosophies or leadership styles of the superintendent. The four stages or conceptualizations and timelines are not necessarily axiomatic. Distinctions among the stages and conceptions are often nebulous “making it difficult for an observer or practitioner to determine where one ends and another begins” (Kowalski, 2001, p. 192). The

general consensus in the designation of the role of the superintendent does not exist and the ongoing evolution continues to this day. The position remains heavily influenced by a myriad of opinions among politicians, school boards, parents, interest groups, school administrators and teachers, as to what the role of the superintendent is (Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Mayo, 1999). For the past four decades, the role of the superintendent has been mainly characterized as a multirole, which includes skills and knowledge pertinent to all previous roles conceptualizations (Björk, Kowalski & Browne-Ferrigno, 2005).

The position of the superintendent has been viewed in various ways. Table 1 illustrates six of the key roles associated with the superintendency.

Table 1

Six Primary Roles Associated with the Superintendency

Role	Responsibility
Teacher-Scholar	Provides leadership in areas of teaching and instructional supervision
Business Manager	Provides management of human and material resources
Educational Statesman	Resolves conflict and forges coalitions
Applied Social Scientist	Provides leadership for social and cultural issues
Communicator	Verbal communication, public speaking, media relations
Multi-role	Knowledge and skills pertinent to nearly all roles

Note: Adopted from Brunner & Kowalski, 2001, p. 194 and Björk et al., 2014).

**Teacher-scholar**

Noted educational historian and researcher Raymond Callahan, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Delaware, first introduced the conceptualization of the role of school superintendents segmented into four major themes in 1966. From its beginnings and up until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the superintendent was seen as a scholar, an educator, a teacher of teachers, and an educational leader (Björk, Glass & Brunner, 2005; Callahan, 1966; Cuban, 1976).

Callahan summarized what the role of the superintendent was like in 1890:

It must be made his recognized duty to train teachers and inspire them with high ideals; to revise the course of study when new light shows that improvement is possible; to see that pupils and teachers are supplied with needed appliances for the best possible work; to devise rational methods of promoting pupils, thus protecting teachers and pupils from the narrowing, grooving, and otherwise vicious influence of the 'stated examination grind'; and especially, as essential to the highest success, to see that the schools are in the hands of the best available teachers. (Callahan, 1966, p. 76-77)

The importance of the role of the superintendent as an educational leader has been emphasized perhaps more than ever before in our nation's history. For example, by 2006, possibly in response to the implementation of NCLB in 2002, over forty-nine percent of superintendents were hired by their school boards as educational leaders. Almost three decades earlier that number was below twelve percent (Glass & Franceschini, 2007). The role of the superintendent as an educational leader reemerged in importance but with a new caveat. The contemporary superintendent is expected to increase his/her visibility, create an educational vision, model academic expectations, and has been tasked with "and monitoring and evaluating instructional and curricular program implementation" (Peterson & Barnett, 2005, p. 118).

### **Business manager**

The role as a school executive or business manager emerged as a result of the transformation of the American economic system from agrarian to industrial, the explosive growth of cities, massive immigration to the United States and the influences of scientific management and theory (Kowalski, 2005a). This conceptualization is found throughout the literature and over time emerged as "one of the most important role expectations" for school superintendents (Browne-Ferrigno & Glass, 2005, p. 138).

This role emergence, however, “created role conflict for many superintendents in office during this area, especially those who believed that instructional leadership was their primary responsibility” (Kowalski, 1999, p. 189). This role was also criticized, if not condemned, in the strongest terms. For example, in response to application of business and industrial models to educational administration in the 1960’s, Raymond Callahan in “Education and the Cult of Efficiency” (1964), referred to this development as a “tragedy” (p. 244) in American education. An excerpt from Callahan’s book reveals the intensity of his condemnation:

The tragedy itself was fourfold: that educational questions were subordinated to business considerations; that administrators were produced who were not, in any true sense, educators; that a scientific label was put on some very unscientific and dubious methods and practices; and that an anti-intellectual climate, already prevalent, was strengthened. As the business industrial values and procedures spread into the thinking and acting of educators, countless educational decisions were made on economic or on non educational grounds... The whole development produced men who did not understand education or scholarship. Thus, they could and did approach education in businesslike, mechanical, organizational way. (p. 246-247)

The role expectations associated with this conceptualization have evolved over time and continue to inform the public perception of managerial competency and organizational effectiveness of superintendents, who, after all, are entrusted with multi-million dollar operations financed by the public (Kowalski, 1999). In current practice, the superintendent is somewhat of a generalist expected to have a working knowledge of different organizational functions such as

finance, personnel, public relations, facilities and maintenance, collective bargaining, and related functions (Sharp & Walter, 2004).

To this day, superintendents as school administrators are routinely compared to business executives or CEOs. In a recent dissertation study on the implementation of executive coaching for superintendents in New York, Nuciforo (2015) indicated that superintendents also perceive their roles as similar to business CEOs with “similar management and executive skills” (p. 41). Not surprisingly, by 2005 nearly one-third of the states did not require professional educator licenses or implemented alternative methods to obtain a superintendent’s license to the military, political, or business professionals (Kowalski, 2005).

Despite the heated disagreement and often-contentious debate over the nature and role of the superintendency, the effective operation of public schools demanded increased expertise in management and business operations. The image of the ideal superintendent changed from teacher-scholar to executive, efficient leader and manager; an idea that persists to this day (Kowalski, 1999, Browne-Ferrigno & Glass, 2005).

### **Educational statesmen**

The conceptualization of the role of the superintendent away from teacher-scholar began to take shape at the turn of the century towards the role of political negotiator, political strategist or democratic leader (Björk & Gurley, 2005; Cuban, 1976). By the 1930’s this role characterization was fully established even though engaging in these activities was previously regarded as unprofessional conduct (Björk & Lindle, 2001; Kowalski, 2005; Kowalski, 1995).

Some argue that politics in education that was regarded as inappropriate in previous decades remains as a concern to many seasoned administrators (Björk & Lindle, 2001; Howlett, 1993; Kowalski, 1995). However, being a skillful “politician” was, and still is, an essential

function for superintendents who are perceived as government and community leaders. In such political environments, superintendents must possess the necessary skills and acumen to maneuver the political context in which their position exists (Howlett, 1993; Sharp & Walter, 2004). Although this role weakened by the mid-1950s, it never died. It continues to reappear. Such resurgence was mainly a result of political battles raging over inadequate school funding, just as they did over sixty years before (Björk et al., 2014; Björk & Gurley, 2005). To a large extent, the political success of the superintendent depends on his or her “capacity to galvanize support of school board members, citizens, parents, and employees for district initiatives” (Björk et al., 2014, p. 454). However, in his dissertation study, Curry (2016) found that board presidents, teacher’s unions, principals, and superintendents themselves “rated the role of politician as the least essential” (p. 5).

### **Applied social scientist**

The middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed an increased dissatisfaction of the American public with the adequacy of schools and their capacity to address social conditions of underprivileged and minority populations. The idealistic view of the superintendent as a democratic leader “was replaced by a new conception that viewed the superintendent as a combination of educational realist and applied social scientist” (Kowalski, 1999, p. 194). As an applied social scientist, the superintendent was expected to use scientifically based research and tacit knowledge to determine and decide what works and what does not and be well prepared academically to address the social problems facing public schools (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2005; Kowalski, 2011). As a social scientist, the superintendent was expected to be more pragmatic than idealistic, to get things done and to take a leadership role in understanding school organizations and those in it. In part, this role expectation was heavily influenced after World

War II by the rapid development of the social sciences and the newly acquired knowledge of the administrative process in organizations. School administrators eagerly embraced this new knowledge in the performance of their already difficult jobs. Substantial investment and financial support by the Kellogg Foundation in the field of education administration preparation further facilitated the evolution of the role of the superintendent as an applied social scientist (Björk et al., 2014; Callahan, 1964). In the 1960s and 70s, homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, increased crime rates, unemployment, increased poverty, domestic violence, and a myriad of other social ills impacted the role of the superintendent. Superintendents, as applied scientists, were unable to solve these persistent problems, which led to a series of attacks against public schools, and by extension, universities responsible for the preparation of school leaders (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2005). Practitioners, including superintendents, rejected the social sciences approach as “being too theoretical and essentially detached from day-to-day problems” (Kowalski, 1999, p. 196) facing public schools. The approach however, was not totally abandoned but rather incorporated to other roles of the superintendent to confront the societal and demographic changes challenging public education. Superintendents were now expected to understand “the relationship between education and society and knowing how data on changing demographics, poverty, racism, drugs, and violence may influence children’s learning outcomes” (Björk et al., 2014, p. 455). The role was also expanded further to include new dimensions. According to Fusarelli & Fusarelli (2005), for contemporary superintendents, this role is re-conceptualized to include social activism and advocacy. As such, superintendents as applied social scientists “must become active interventionists in leading school improvement” (p. 196) to ameliorate academic performance of all students but particularly for a fast-growing student population characterized

by minority, low socioeconomic and diverse student populations (Gonzalez, 2013; Kena, 2016; Maxwell, 2014; Potter & Hoque, 2013).

The role of the superintendent as an applied social scientist remains essential (Kowalski, 1999). Superintendents are still expected to possess a sufficient professional knowledge base in a variety of social factors affecting students. The role expectation was expanded even further with the emergence of NCLB and state academic requirements. The practice was redefined to include knowledge and understanding of student academic performance data by student subgroups (e.g. race, ethnicity, at-risk) and to make data-driven decisions accordingly. Furthermore, additional dimensions as an applied social scientist expected “superintendents to become actively involved with business and community organizations” (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2005, p. 188) to garner community support and resources to benefit students. In essence, superintendents are expected to become “social advocates for all children” and redress injustices in education (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2005 p. 200).

In response to such expectations, autoethnographic studies of superintendents and other school administrators focused on the role of the superintendent as applied social scientist abound. Daily (2011) for example, in studying her role as an African American woman and first-time superintendent, asked, “Drawing upon my experiences as a first-time superintendent, and also as an African American woman, are there lessons that might be of significance to other first-time superintendents?” and “Did my commitment to educational social justice impact/influence my development as a first-time superintendent and, if so, in what way?” (Dailey, 2011, p. 28). In part, she concluded that her biggest challenge was dealing with the board of managers and communicating with them. To compound the challenges, as an African-American woman, she perceived the urgency of helping children who were failing “differently than the White board

members” (Dailey, 2011, p. 76). She recognized as a fundamental error making decisions and recommendations to the board members based on anticipated votes instead of what she thought was in the best interest of students and the district. Her autoethnography is a candid account, and a warning, to new superintendents (like me) that, even when you have the best intentions, institutional hierarchies “allow blame for failure to be placed squarely at the doorstep of the superintendent’s office” (Brown et al., 2007, p. 5). Similarly, Rose (2011), in response to the question, “As a first-time district superintendent, what roadblocks stand in the way of effectively leading the district?” (p. 2), designed his autoethnography to offer additional understandings to first-time superintendents in school districts “with rapidly changing demographics, specifically where growing populations of Latino students, with socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic challenges require new service models and interventions” (Rose, 2011, p. 75). Garza (2008) also narrated his lived experiences as first-time superintendent and the problems encountered in his efforts “to maintain [a] commitment to leadership for social justice” (Garza Jr., 2008, p. 163). Other autoethnographic studies, while focused on the role of race and social justice, also delved into the role of the superintendent as a communicator (Bunch, 2016).

### **Communicator**

The emergence of the United States as an information-based society intensified the need for superintendents to evolve and adapt to a new role as a communicator. Educational reforms of the 1980’s increased the expectations and need of superintendents to communicate with the public and engage stakeholders in a wider array of district and school performance issues (Björk et al., 2014). By the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, superintendents were the primary source of information to school boards and interacted directly with community organizations, parents, and other civic and political organizations (Björk et al., 2014). The advent of the information age

compelled superintendents to evolve beyond an office job and behind-the-scenes role to that of a communicator. Superintendents were expected not only to have a working knowledge of the multifarious functions of schools but also to communicate effectively to the public.

For the contemporary superintendent, communication would no longer be viewed as a skill “but rather as a pervasive role characterization” (Kowalski, 2005a, p. 11). Under this role, superintendents are expected “to work collaboratively with principals, teachers, parents, and other taxpayers to build and pursue collective visions” (Kowalski, 2005a, p. 11). By 2015, the vast majority of superintendents concurred that effective communication was very important in the performance of their jobs (Finnan et al., 2015).

In 1993, the *Professional Standards for the Superintendency* (American Association of School Administrators, 1993) were developed and published in an effort to guide the preparation, licensure, and evaluations of the superintendent. The standards included communication and community relations as an important component of the superintendent’s professional expectations. Specifically, standard 3, indicates as follows:

Articulate district vision, mission, and priorities to the community and mass media.

Demonstrate an understanding of political theory and skills needed to build community support for district priorities. Understand and be able to communicate with all cultural groups in the community. Demonstrate that good judgment and actions communicate as well as words. Develop formal and informal techniques to gain external perception of a district by means of surveys, advisory groups, and personal contact. Communicate and project an articulate position for education. Write and speak clearly and forcefully.

Demonstrate formal and informal listening skills. Demonstrate group membership and leadership skills. Identify the political context of the community environment. Formulate

strategies for passing referenda. Persuade the community to adopt an initiative for the welfare of students. Demonstrate conflict mediation. Demonstrate consensus building. Demonstrate school/community relations, school business partnerships, and related public service activities. Identify, track, and deal with issues. Develop and carry out internal and external communication plans. (American Association of School Administrators, 1993, p. 7)

By 1996, the Council of Chief State School Officers (COCSSO) with the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), under the auspices of the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA), developed new standards with a common core of knowledge, dispositions, and performances for school leaders to help link administrators “more forcefully to productive schools and enhanced educational outcomes” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996, p. III). Within a decade, these standards become almost universally accepted across the United States and continued to emphasize the importance of the superintendent as a communicator. By 2008, the standards were slightly revised and renamed *Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008*. The new document emphasized the leadership role of school administrators and their influence on student learning. However, the role of communicator was implied, not explicitly defined (Canole & Young, 2013). The standards were once again revised in 2011. This time, and without ambiguity, the reference to the superintendent emphasized the role of the superintendent as an effective communicator of the vision and mission of the school district to multiple constituencies. In response to new demands and 21<sup>st</sup>-century challenges in education, NPBEA developed new standards to guide the practice of school administrators “in directions that will be the most productive and beneficial to students” (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, p. 1). The role of

communicator was once again prominent in at least four of the ten new standards. While these standards apply mainly to school level practitioners, they are applicable to central office administrators (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015).

In Texas, the standards required for the superintendent's certification also include a wide range of communication and expectations relative to community relations (Texas Administrative Code, 2014). These include the development of external and internal communications plan and public relations program, implementation of strategies for communication with all stakeholders, systematic and effective communication to promote the district's vision and priorities, and the implementation of proactive communication strategies to articulate educational issues.

### **Social Capital and the Superintendency**

The position of the superintendent grew in influence and prestige over the years. Surprisingly however, prior to the late 1980's the role of the superintendent was one of the least researched topics in school administration (Hoyle, 1988) and "in spite of the intimate relationship between school districts and their leadership, and the nature and evolution of the superintendency has been largely neglected by scholars, writers, and those responsible for the professional preparation" (Leithwood, Farquhar, & Boich, 1989, p. 1). During this period of time "research on the superintendency [was] remarkably thin, while research on the leadership role of the superintendent [was] sparser still" (Murphy & Hallinger, 1986, p. 214). Few researchers were interested in the study of the role of superintendents. Crowson and Morison (1990) concluded: "there has been surprisingly little inquiry into how superintendents handle the internal organizational affairs of their school districts" (Leithwood, 1995, p. 14).

Since the 1990's, studies on the role of the superintendent grew. A comprehensive ERIC search of published studies in a variety of scholarly journals with the search topic "the role of

school superintendents” or “superintendency” generates over ninety and one hundred twenty-nine peer-reviewed articles respectively. Twenty-nine articles deal with the role of the superintendent of schools, albeit in a variety of capacities. The majority of the articles are dominated by studies on instructional management, managing the central office, superintendent mobility, support for teacher leadership, conflict resolution, skills, gender, and job satisfaction. Salient among the rest of the articles was the study of woman superintendents with over thirty studies and rural superintendents with approximately fifteen studies. The rest of the articles oscillated between studies of managerial skills such as dealing with collective bargaining, common core curriculum, educational reform, school board relationships, leadership, tenure, politics, dealing with stress, requirements, shortage and mentoring. None of the articles articulates or makes reference to the superintendent as an agent of social capital for students in general and low-socioeconomic, minority students in particular.

In essence, the role of the contemporary superintendent continues to evolve beyond the traditional roles. As superintendents face the realities of changing student demographics, contemporary superintendents may be able to confront the new realities and expectations to mitigate the needs of all students, and particularly the needs of minority and low socioeconomic students by redefining their role as a builder of social capital.

### **Social Capital**

In the social sciences, the theory of social capital is conceptualized in various forms. It is used to describe social relationships across different fields “encompassing a wide range of themes such as politics, employment, education, and social stratification” (Bae, 2015, p. 65). In education, the first usage of the term *social capital* is credited to Jyda Judson Hanifan (1879-1932), a school superintendent (Putnam, 2000). In 1916, Hanifan coined the term in reference to

“goodwill, fellowship, mutual sympathy, and social intercourse among a group of individuals and families who make up the social unit” (as cited in Farr, 2004, p. 11). He believed that individuals are helpless if left to themselves. He expounded on mutual benefit to the individual and society in general when they form networks of cooperation.

As a superintendent of schools, Hanifan advocated to make education and the school at the center of public life. He worked on behalf of minorities and migrants. He worked to make the lives of rural, poor and illiterate children better and encouraged the teachers to do the same. His writings describe the deplorable conditions of schools, segregation and unequal education for children of color, and the inequalities of wealth, and advocated to make them better (Farr, 2004).

Contemporary studies and research in education are dominated by conceptualizations of the theories derived from previous work of two sociologists: Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman. For Bourdieu, social capital “is made up of social obligations (‘connections’), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 16). Bourdieu specifically defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 21). Bourdieu’s theory provided an avenue in the understanding of social relationships, networks and support that facilitate access to the available resources embedded in the membership of a given group that can also be converted into cultural and symbolic capital, which is expressed in any form of property, whether economic, cultural, social or physical (Grenfell, 2009). Thus, social capital is cumulative, produces social benefits, converts into other forms of capital, and has the capacity for reproduction (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). The amount and quality of valuable resources accessed by an individual through relationships, through membership in a network, allow individuals to

achieve things that otherwise they would not be able to achieve (Portes, 1998). Bourdieu (1986) proposed that the size of the network and the volume of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital belonging to persons in the network, determine the size of the volume of social capital possessed by an individual.

Coleman's theory of social capital also emphasized the importance of group membership and the benefits afforded to individuals or families based on social network relationships. Coleman, however, focused on social capital in the creation of human capital which exists in the relations among persons, by its function not as "a single entity but a variety of different entities with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors—whether persons or corporate actors—within the structure" (Coleman, 1988, p. S98). This rather vague definition proposes a valuable resource to an actor that is dependent on social relations among individuals within an organization (Coleman, 1988) where trustworthiness, expectations, and obligations form the basis for social capital within a group or an organization or community. Similarly, information channels or the means by which information is acquired represents another form of social capital (Coleman, 1988). Coleman includes norms and effective sanctions that promote the common good over self-interest as the main characteristics (Coleman, 1988). Coleman's definition incorporates the concept of closure and intergenerational closure among families and their children, "parents know the parents of their children's friends" (Dika & Singh, 2002, p. 34). Closure develops trust of the social structure among the group. It facilitates the enforcement and proliferation of norms, obligations, and expectation.

There is significant variation between Bourdieu's and Coleman's theories as well as similarities. Bourdieu's theory is grounded on the idea of symbolic power and social

reproduction among the dominant class. For Bourdieu, social capital was a form of investment, a collective asset, relied upon to preserve the dominant status or advantage of the privileged (Bourdieu, 1973). Coleman focuses on the transformation of social capital into human capital (Coleman, 1988). Bourdieu's work makes an explicit distinction between resources and the ability to obtain them at different levels of society. He recognizes the unequal value of social ties; Coleman does not make such distinctions (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Portes, 1998). Both theories originated in the study of educational achievement and attainment and both centered on the benefits to families or individuals as a result of their networks with others (Dika & Singh, 2002).

The form of social capital espoused by both Bourdieu and Coleman is absent in the experience of minority working-class youth who have limited access to social resources (Horvat et al., 2003). Bourdieu's theory, however, helps to explain why low socioeconomic status groups have limited social capital because of their class status and class habitus (Bourdieu, 1986; Gonzalez, 2013). While Bourdieu acknowledges that all social groups possess social capital, it is not the beneficial form of capital that is valued by the dominant group. Whereas middle-class families have access to sources of social capital outside of schools such as professional acquaintances, minority, and poor students do not (Gonzalez, 2013; Ream, 2003). Scholars refer to this form of social capital as bridging and bonding (Briggs, 1998; Putnam, 2002; Woolcock, 1998). Putnam (2000) differentiates these two forms of social capital by suggesting, "Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40" (p. 19).

Bridging social capital exposes individuals to diverse worldviews and affords them access to new and valuable information. Whereas bonding social capital refers to interactions and

strong ties among ethnic or similar groups or family relationships (Ellison, Wohn, & Greenhow, 2014). Students from low-socioeconomic communities may “be lacking the more diffuse and extensive bridging social capital deployed by non-poor [communities]” (Woolcock, 1998, p. 3), which limits their abilities and exposure beyond their immediate family and restricts interaction contained in a small-circumscribed social network (Ellison et al., 2014). On the other hand, low socioeconomic and/or minority students may possess a strong bonding form of social capital. However, this form of social capital, as Xavier de Souza Briggs (1998) suggests, is good for “getting by” whereas bridging social capital is crucial for “getting ahead” (p. 178). In general, “the literature suggests that the social networks accessible by working-class and poor families are less valuable than those of middle-class families for negotiating the particular institutional environment formed by the school” (Horvat et al., 2003, p. 323).

Unfortunately, these definitions and theories ignore or minimize the strengths that low socioeconomic and minority students “gain from their racial and cultural heritage” (Straubhaar, 2013, p. 95) and “exposes White, middle class culture as the standard and therefore all other forms and expressions of ‘culture’ are judged in comparison to this ‘norm’” (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). The social capital that low socioeconomic and/or minority students possess in navigating educational institutions may be just as valuable as other forms of social capital. For example, (Yosso, 2005) states that minority and/or low-socioeconomic students draw on social contacts and community resources “to help a student identify and attain a college scholarship. These networks may help a student in preparing the scholarship application itself, while also reassuring the student emotionally that she/he is not alone in the process of pursuing higher education” (p. 79). Similarly, Mexican immigrant families “transcend the adversity in their daily lives by uniting with supportive social networks” (Delgado-Gaitan, 2001, p. 105).

The inequality of Bourdieunian social capital acquisition is also fomented by school structures that prevent or limit access to sources inherent in a school system (Gonzalez, 2013; Shoji, Haskins, Rangel, & Sorensen, 2014). American sociologist Ricardo Stanton-Salazar (1977), who explored and expanded Bourdieu's concept in the study of minority and underprivileged children, found that social capital is of paramount importance in the life of minority youth and students. He defined social capital as "consisting of resources and key forms of social support embedded in one's network or associations, and accessible through direct or indirect ties with institutional agents" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1067). Including the superintendent as an institutional agent in the network of students increases the students' social capital in a school system.

### **Institutional Agents**

The concept of institutional agents and the role they play is of paramount importance for this study. Institutional agents consist of individuals of high status and authority within the hierarchy of the school system who, when situated in the students' network, manifest specific actions on behalf of students. Traditionally, institutional agents refer to teachers, counselors, and social workers. These institutional agents fulfill one or multiple roles on behalf of students. They provide not only moral support but also serve as empowering agents for students (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

The superintendents should consider becoming institutional agents of social capital for students, families, and the community they serve. The position alone, however, does not engender social capital for students. While the old less visible role of the superintendent has improved since the 1980's to that of a highly visible actor (Hoyle, 2005), visibility alone does not engender this form of capital. The mere existence of the superintendent in the network of

students does not mean that students have access to institutional resources (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013). Superintendents become institutional agents only when they mobilize the support of the institution, use their power and authority, position, status and reputation for the benefit, and support of students (Stanton-Salazar, 2011), and students have direct access and communication with the superintendent.

Institutional agents regularly engage in at least fourteen different roles in four categories (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). These roles can be classified into four domains and each domain into various dimensions. Dimensions can be classified into related descriptors attributed to specific actions manifested by each role. The four domains include; (1) Direct Support, (2) Integrative Support; (3) System Linkage and Networking Support; and (4) System Developer.

Domain one is manifested when institutional agents act as resource agents, knowledge agents, advisors, advocates and networking coaches. A resource agent is one who provides personal or positional support. A knowledge agent is described as one who knows the system and can provide knowledge to help students navigate the system. An advisor helps students gather information, collaborate with students to assess problems, find solutions, and make decisions (Stanton-Salazar, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Institutional agents play a vital role in empowering students with adequate information and knowledge that minority and low-socioeconomic students lack and are not able to obtain from their family systems (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013; Ellison et al., 2014; Shoji et al., 2014; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Knowledge empowerment for students builds human capital (Coleman, 1988) and cultural capital (Portes, 1998). Knowledge and information provided by institutional agents about academic programs or college information are of paramount importance to the success of low socioeconomic and minority students (Gonzalez, 2013; Gonzalez et al., 2003).

Domain two includes integrative support and cultural guide dimensions. These roles are demonstrated when institutional agents help students integrate and participate in associations or professional venues. As a cultural guide, students are mentored and taught how to integrate into different cultural settings and interact with key people (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Institutional agents serving as mentors or role models, who take an interest in the educational lives of students, play a significant role in the students' academic success (Gonzalez, 2013). Mentors act as transformational agents who break off the continuous reproduction of poverty dominant in low socioeconomic and minority students (Bourdieu, 1973; Stanton-Salazar, 2001; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). The professional literature is virtually silent regarding the superintendent of schools as a mentor or role model for students.

In domain three, institutional agents act as recruiters, bridging agents, institutional brokers, and coordinators. In these roles, institutional agents recruit students into departments or programs; serve as a bridge between students and key school personnel and social networks; negotiate agreements and introduce resources available to the student; and assess the needs of students and identify resources to meet those needs and ensure student utilizes them (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

Domains, one, two and three are predominantly described by action verbs. Students benefit only when institutional agents are willing, able, and in possession of the resources needed to act on the students' behalf (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013). Descriptors of these domains imply knowledge of the students' needs and require direct engagement, networks, and relationships and by derivation expectations, trustworthiness, and obligations of both students and institutional agents (Coleman, 1988; Museus & Neville, 2012; Shoji et al., 2014; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). The System Developer domain four, on the other hand, is performed in the absence of students.

Domain four includes the dimensions of program developer, lobbyist, and political advocate. It consists of developing programs integrating students in the system of agents and supporting students, lobbying for instructional resources and social policies, and joining political groups to advocate on behalf of students. Students may or may not be aware of the undertaking of these activities performed on their behalf (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

### **In the Students' Network**

Of paramount importance are the direct and indirect relationship and interaction of the superintendent with students if he or she intends to become an institutional agent of social capital for students (Gonzalez et al., 2003; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Social capital demands, "changes in the relationships among persons that facilitate action" (Coleman, 1988, p. S100). Thus, the superintendent cannot be a distant figure unknown to the students, but rather he or she must be part of the students' "network" (Harper, 2001) and form ties with students to develop trust, obligations, expectations, and actions (Coleman, 1988; Stockard & Mayberry, 1992). A large body of research supports the conclusion that students, who perceive school personnel as being supportive and caring, benefit academically and socially. Researchers also found positive correlations between higher-level academic successes when school personnel perceived students as high achievers. Similarly, studies "revealed that adolescent student reports of teachers as being supportive and having positive expectations were the strongest predictors of positive school behavior" (Woolley & Bowen, 2007, p. 94). More importantly, researchers have also shown that supportive and caring adults at school are especially important for the success of low-socioeconomic and minority children. The general consensus is that the climate in a school that engenders the most benefit to students is primarily created by positive relationships between students and adults in the school (Woolley, 2006; Woolley & Bowen, 2007). Clearly, students

perform better when teachers and all adults in a school system support and expect students to do well. A superintendent who wishes to be included in the network of students as an agent of social capital must willingly position himself or herself in the network of students to increase the “size” and “volume” of the students’ social capital that has been associated with favorable educational outcomes and experiences for students at all levels (Museus & Neville, 2012).

The support of institutional agents has particularly been linked to the positive educational experience and outcomes of minority and low-socioeconomic students in K-12 and higher education (Museus & Ravello, 2010; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). The latest census data shows that the high school drop out rate for Hispanics declined by 21.8 percentage points from 1990 to 2015; Hispanics, however, are twice more likely to drop out of school (10.6%) than their White student counterparts (5.2%) (NCSE, 2016). This shift in enrollment coupled with socioeconomic status, language, and dropout rates for minority students in public schools underscores the importance of school administrators, particularly superintendents, to adapt to this new reality and expand their role and practice.

### **A New Role of the Superintendent**

The multifarious demands of the superintendent in the various roles, in view of new state and federal accountability measures, poses a serious challenge to the possibility of the superintendent’s role evolving into a new realm—particularly one that compels the superintendent to interact directly with students. However, publications associating the role of school superintendents with the term “social capital” in relation to students are not only rare, they are almost non-existent. The opposite is true for other conceptualizations of the superintendent’s role (Björk & Kowalski, 2005; Kowalski, 2001; Carter & Cunningham, 1997; Kowalski, 1999; Leithwood, 1995; Norton, 1996; Sharp & Walter, 2004). In addition, the

inclusion of the superintendent as a source of social capital for students is remarkably absent in the professional literature. Research papers and articles on social capital, spanning from 1988 to 2015, seldom include the word “superintendent.” In a search of peer-reviewed articles on the study of the superintendency ranging from 1976 to 2014 under the terms “superintendent” and “social” and “capital,” the term “social capital” generates only a few articles that are not relevant to this study. Similarly, the role of the school superintendent and the role of an institutional agent of social capital for students in general and low socioeconomic minority students in particular, appear to be mutually exclusive for the contemporary superintendent.

Nonetheless, a growing body of research indicates the importance of institutional agents in student academic outcomes (Marks, 2000; Murdock, 1999; Voelkl & Frone, 2000; Woolley & Bowen, 2007). Similarly, research has highlighted the importance of caring and supportive adults to the success of minority and low socioeconomic students (Johns, 2001).

While institutional agents identified in the professional literature, such as teachers, counselors, and social workers, provide a substantial amount of social capital in domains one, two and three, and to a lesser extent domain four, they do not have the “capital” beyond their position of authority (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). For example, they may not have the influence to exercise authority over administrators or the authority to implement programs that expand the networks that build social capital and provide institutional or community resources for students beyond the school and the classroom.

In contrast, the superintendent has the positional power and authority to access all the resources of the school district at his or her disposal to build social capital for students. However, to fulfill the role of an institutional agent, he or she must position himself or herself as part of the social capital network of students and demonstrate an interest in students and build meaningful

relationships in which students feel comfortable asking for help, information, guidance, and support in the same or similar way as other institutional agents do (Carolan-Silva & Reyes, 2013; Dika & Singh, 2002; Lopez, 1996; Museus & Neville, 2012; Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

This study provided an understanding of the superintendent as an agent of social capital for students to be described, studied and understood from the perspective of a superintendent through a form of self-analysis and discovery. This method of study is known as autoethnography.

### **The Autoethnography**

In the social sciences, autoethnography has evolved over the last three and a half decades (Anderson, 2010). This method of research was originally coined as a form of study in which the researcher is the focus of the research in relation to others engaged in a common activity (Hayano, 1979). Yet it is still considered a relatively new and emerging form of research methodology under development (Dauphinee, 2010; Furman, 2015). This evolution has caused confusion and difficulty in determining a precise application and definition. The term autoethnography has become the broad umbrella under which similar personal narratives from various disciplines are included. The term is often used interchangeably with analogous inquiries that include the self as the focus of study. These personal narratives include evocative narrative, ethnographic autobiography, opportunistic research, confessional tales, personal sociology, lived experience, and other similar expressions and storytelling (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2012; Wall, 2006).

The use of autoethnography as a form of “action research” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 754) is “a valuable tool in examining the complex, diverse and sometimes messy world of education” (Starr, 2010, p. 2). More than just telling stories, it is an accepted qualitative research

method capable of powerful examinations of the relationships between self and others (Hamdan, 2012; Starr, 2010; Wall, 2006). The field of education is “ripe grounds for autoethnographic study” (Starr, 2010, p. 4) as a form of pedagogy with an “emphasis on a transformative or emancipatory process for the individual and in the more widely constructed social relations in which the individual participates” (Starr, 2010, p. 4). In this study, autoethnography presents an opportunity to address some of the gaps and misconceptions that exist in the understanding of the role of the superintendent of schools.

Stemming from the field of anthropology, autoethnography is a research method that combines ethnography and autobiography at the same time (Chang, 2008; Pace, 2012; Reed-Danahay, 2009), with the ultimate goal of understanding a cultural phenomenon through “autobiographical experience” (Chang, 2007, p. 4) from which a new understanding of the culture in question is revealed.

In the professional literature “autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethno), and on self (auto)” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740). This method of inquiry is a genre of writing that connects the personal to the cultural (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2012). It is a “self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social context” (Spry, 2001, p. 6) and attempts to bring together the humanities with the social sciences by emphasizing dialogue, self-reflection and emotionality of the individual story (Bochner, 2012; Ellis, 2012) where “[r]eaders and audiences are invited to share in the emotional experiences of an author” (Jones, 2002, p. 764). As a narrative inquiry, it focuses on the individual experience, thoughts, behaviors, and emotions that are written “in a way that evokes the imagination of the reader” (Muncey, 2010, p. 2).

Autoethnography distinguishes itself from other self-narratives, such as memoirs, autobiographies, or creative non-fiction in at least three ways. First, it is a qualitative research method where data is collected, analyzed and interpreted in an attempt to understand others in society through self. It is consciously developed and planned as qualitative research (Cook, 2014; Denzin, 2006; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ngunjiri et al., 2010; Pace, 2012).

Second, autoethnography is self-focused. The researcher's everyday life and experience are the subjects and the object of the research (Ellis, 2012; Furman, 2015; Hamdan, 2012; Ngunjiri et al., 2010; Pelias, 2003; Philaretou & Allen, 2005). Autoethnography values the storytelling of self as an extension of the cultural community (Chang, 2008; Cook, 2014). It is a highly-personalized story of the author about his or her own lived experience related to the personal and the cultural (Richardson, 2000). Muncey (2005) states "Autoethnography celebrates rather than demonizes the individual story" (p. 78). Indeed, storytelling is one of the distinguishing attributes of qualitative researchers (Holt, 2003; Wolcott, 1994).

Third, autoethnography is context conscious (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). While this form of research uses personal narratives as the primary data, it does not do so in a vacuum. It seeks to achieve cultural understanding and connectivity between self and others through self-reflective narrative via its interpretation and analysis in the context of culture and society and others within the same context (Chang, 2008; Holt, 2003; Stanley, 1993; Wolcott, 2004). After all, individuals do not obtain their social experiences alone. Autoethnography also attempts to understand how the self is shaped, responded and reacted to, by the surrounding cultural influences (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Furthermore, autoethnography, through self-narrative, attempts to understand cultural context by gathering knowledge and interpretation from one's own past (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Hamdan, 2012; Pace, 2012; Vonèche, 2001). The dual role of the researcher in this method of

study “provides an avenue for doing something meaningful for yourself and the world” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 672). In other words, autoethnography can exert influence on the world in general, other people, and self (Muncey, 2010).

Traditional ethnographical data sources such as interviews, observation field notes, documents, research diaries, participation, self-observation, and other artifacts are honored in autoethnographical research (Chang, 2007; Chang, 2008; Wall, 2008). Other sources of inquiry include personal documents such as diaries, first-person narratives, letters, self-statements, personal journals, and personal recollections (Philaretou & Allen, 2005; Wall, 2008). Autoethnography undergoes the same research process of systematic approach to the collection of data, analysis, interpretation and report writing as ethnographical research (Chang, 2007; Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Ethnographical data may also include personal recollections to fill any voids left from written documents (Philaretou & Allen, 2005). Coffey (1999) refers to ethnography as “an act of memory” (p. 27) because all fieldwork and review and analysis of personal data sources are intrinsically linked to the memories that shaped the written text. These memories or headnotes of the researcher’s experience and impressions may be more important than field notes but are too extensive to be recorded (Wall, 2008). Memory is a resource of personal information only available to the autoethnographers and no one else (Chang, 2007). According to Wall (2008), entire ethnographies and autoethnographies “have been composed from headnotes, or memories, alone” (p. 45). However, the expectation remains that memory accounts should be supported by hard data and avoided as an exclusive reliance as a data source in the construction of autoethnographical research (Chang, 2007).

In the social sciences literature, autoethnographical texts appear in a variety of forms such as fiction, memoirs and ethnic autobiography (Spry, 2001). They also appear as poetry,

fiction, novels, personal essays, short stories, and social science prose (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2012). Autoethnography is also gaining momentum as a research tool in the creative and performing arts (Pace, 2012) and is being explored in the academic community in a variety of forms (Ngunjiri et al., 2010).

Autoethnographies have been generally classified in one of two ethnographical styles: evocative and analytical. The predominant discourse in the literature, however, refers to evocative autoethnography almost exclusively (Anderson, 2006; Muncey, 2010). Of the two forms, evocative autoethnography has become one of the most successful forms in the social sciences (Denzin, 2006; Muncey, 2010).

Evocative autoethnography is a descriptive form of literary writing written in the first-person voice. Influenced by the humanities and arts-based traditions, this autoethnographical form involves a highly narrative and expressive storytelling that resembles a biography or a novel where the researcher's life is the subject of the research. As Ellis and Bochner (2000) explain, these personal accounts express “vivid details about the author's own experience.... The author privileges stories over analysis, allowing and encouraging alternative readings and multiple interpretations” (p. 745) that can provide insight into the world being researched.

These personal stories not only involve the intensity of feelings and pathos of the author's experience, they have the ability to impact its readers in an emotional and intellectual level, evoke the readers' imagination (Muncey, 2010), and inspire them to take some form of action (Ngunjiri et al., 2010; Starr, 2010).

In response to the popularity and almost exclusive reference of autoethnography to the evocative narrative, Anderson (2006) proposed “analytic autoethnography.” He argues that the “dominance of evocative autoethnography has obscured recognition of the compatibility of

autoethnographic research with more traditional ethnographic practices” (p. 373). The chief components of this proposal include (1) the researcher as a full member of the research group; (2) analytic reflexivity, which involves a desire for deeper understanding of self and others through self-examination; (3) the researcher’s prominent visibility in the written text, including his/her emotions and experiences, which are a vital source of data for the study in consideration (4) research and dialogue with others beyond the self; and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis.

Analytical autoethnography, as evocative autoethnography, may also induce emotive responses. However, the focal point lies on moving beyond a description and representation of self to a critical analysis connecting self-experience to existing research and theory. In this format, autoethnography evolves as a case study approach informed by the experience of the researcher as a vehicle to contextualize and attempt to understand the social world through the analysis of personal experience (Cook, 2014). Vryan (2006), while in general agreement with Anderson (2006), disagrees that analytical autoethnographical research demands gathering data from and about other subjects as a fundamental requirement to be considered analytical. He argues that self-generated data alone can be sufficient in the production of analytical autoethnography and the production of abstract knowledge (Vryan, 2006).

Autoethnographers are widely divided between the two traditions of evocative or analytical autoethnography (Muncey, 2010). This divide does not demand exclusive allegiance to one or the other nor does it compel the researcher to favor the dominant viewpoints of the majority. On the contrary, autoethnographers should include the strengths and insights from both camps if necessary to meet the aims of the social manifestation being studied (Furman, 2015; Holt, 2003) and “mix different styles of writing and presentations of inquiry in the final products

of their autoethnographic writings” (Ngunjiri et al., 2010, p 12). After all, “Good autoethnography is... a provocative weave of story and theory” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 713) that transcends mere narration of the personal story to engage in the analysis and interpretation of a cultural phenomena in relation to others (Chang, 2008; Pace, 2012). This study is influenced by elements of both the analytical and evocative autoethnographic traditions.

Autoethnography as a research methodology has experienced an array of criticism. Certainly, personal narratives are not as privileged as theory and analysis (Bochner, 2001). Some scholars shun the practice as an illegitimate form of research. They view it as self-indulgent and narcissistic personal writing that can lead to self-absorption, with limited scholarly significance (Anderson, 2006; Delamont, 2009; Holt, 2003). Defenders contend that this deficit can be overcome by the analysis and critique of the personal relative to the social context (Cook, 2014). In the words of one defender, “the potential for autoethnographic inquiry to be transformative or catalytic for the author, the reader and the social construct to which they belong is simply too powerful to be labeled self-indulgent” (Starr, 2010, p. 3). According to Muncey (2010) “The real test of self-indulgence must be: do you, the reader, find anything of value in what has been written?” (p. 10).

While Holt (2003) and others before him (Garratt & Hodkinson, 1998; Sparkes, 2002) argue that conventional methods used to judge the reliability and validity of other qualitative research are not necessarily the same for autoethnographical research, detractors contend that positioning the self leads to insider research bias and thus to problems of reliability and validity (Muncey, 2010). However, this claim leads to a paradoxical argument, as others have challenged the traditional ethnographic stance and perceive insider research as strength, not as a deficit (Behar, 1996; Rudge, 1996), where knowledge on certain subject areas would not be easily

expressed without the researcher's own voice and experience. The researcher's own experience, they contend, is a form of "privileged knowledge" that provides insider understanding unavailable to an outsider (Hamdan, 2012, p. 585). Other proponents view autoethnography as "a powerful and unique tool for individual and social understanding" (Ellis, 2009; Ngunjiri et al., 2010, p. 18). Wall, (2006) argues that "autoethnography is more authentic than traditional research approaches, precisely because of the researcher's use of self, the voice of the insider being true than that of the outsider" (p.9). The voice of the insider, blending together the intellect and the emotions, allows the researchers' self, as Bochner (2001) states, to "gives voice to experiences that have been shrouded in silence" (p. 154). Wall, dependent on the works of Laslett, (1999) quotes: "Autobiographies . . . and life stories are likely to present fuller pictures [thick description], ones in which the meanings of events and relationships are more likely to be told than inferred" (p. 391).

Detractors further contend that autoethnography, by using subjective measures, fails to predict or control human belief or behaviors. As such, some have gone further and condemned autoethnographical narrative as unscientific (Muncey, 2010). Conversely, Philaretou and Allen (2005) argue that autoethnography's lack of predictability and inability to control human belief and behaviors is an advantage of autoethnography because it avoids the considerable biases of qualitative and quantitative conventional research methods. They argue that the enormous complexity and totality of the human experience cannot be explained by scientific inquiry alone; neither can it be reduced to quantifiable measurable categories, nor can human beings fit "into the neat little boxes prescribed by classical scientific methodology" (p. 75). Autoethnography, they argue, makes an enormous contribution in explaining the totality and complexity of the unpredictability of the human experience. The claim that the inclusion of subjectivity of self is a

contaminant in social science research is a myth (Muncey, 2010). “These texts, however, are not just subjective accounts of experience,” writes Denzin (1997, p. xvii), “they attempt to reflexively map multiple discourses that occur in a given social space” (as cited in Spry, 2001, p. 22).

Subjectivity is an intrinsic part of autoethnography. By definition, autoethnography relies on the subjectivity of the personal narrative (Bochner, 2012; Philaretou & Allen, 2005; Spry, 2001; Wall, 2006). It forms the researcher’s reality that can be counted as valid and true (Davies, 2008; Muncey, 2010). The researcher’s subjective life, after all, while personal, is, in fact social and the object of new forms of investigation (Rose, 1990). It is this subjectivity that radically influences the course of the event being observed (Behar, 1996) that contributes “to our understanding of the social world and allow us to reflect on what could be different because of what we have learned” (Wall, 2006, p. 3).

Autoethnography is more than just facts and figures that must be “inquired into, interpreted, made sense of, and judged. Facts are important... and should be verified. But it is not the transmission of facts that gives the autoethnographic story its significance and evocative power. Facts don’t tell you what they mean or how they feel” (Bochner, 2012, p. 161). Contrary to the orthodox scientific objectivity, autoethnography honors the intimate subjective details and emotions of human life, including those of the researcher (Muncey, 2005).

Perhaps the most challenging concern discussed in the literature in using autoethnography as a method is the ethical preoccupation. Specifically, autoethnographers have grappled with the challenge of representing others without their consent when writing about themselves (Cook, 2014; Ellis, 2007; Ngunjiri et al., 2010). A similar ethical concern derives from the researcher’s own disclosure and vulnerability in exposing self-emotions and feelings as

“they travail the events in their lives” (Ngunjiri et al., 2010, p. 8). While these considerations have been discussed for a number of years, there is still not specific guidance on how to deal with these ethical issues (Wall, 2008).

This study acknowledges the challenges of autoethnography as a method of inquiry. Nonetheless, this was the only method that afforded the opportunity to convey the experience of the researcher and to hear the voice that otherwise is silenced by more conventional research methods. Analytic autoethnography allowed the researcher to become active and visible and engaged reflexively in the narrative of the study within the written text (Anderson, 2006). Evocative autoethnography permitted the integration of highly personalized stories and lived experiences to explore the relationship of those experiences to the world being investigated (Dauphinee, 2010; Furman, 2015). By combining the strengths and insights of both traditions, this method of study is a powerful tool that explored the researcher’s social and personal experience in a deeper manner to make meaning of the world under consideration despite autoethnography’s shortcomings.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

*“As researchers, we respect the experiences of our participants – why not respect our own experiences as well?” (Cook, 2014, p. 3)*

This study should give insight into the role of the superintendent as well as posit the foundations for the superintendent as an institutional agent situated in the social network of students. To answer the overarching guiding questions of my study, I used a narrative inquiry approach or autoethnography. Guided by the field of sociology, Richardson (1990) observed, “narrative is the best way to understand the human experience because it is the way humans understand their own lives” (p. 183). As a researcher, conducting a study of my role as a superintendent of schools, I was “best situated to describe [my] own experience more accurately than anyone else” (Wall, 2006, p. 3) or as Merton defined it, “the ultimate participant in a dual participant-observer role” (as cited in Anderson, 2011, p. 8).

The overarching questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. What experiences have influenced my role as a superintendent who views himself as an agent of social capital for all students in general and low-socioeconomic, minority students in particular?
2. What are the key practices, beliefs, and complexities for me as a superintendent striving to become an agent of social capital for students?
3. What insights can other superintendents gain from this study?

Among the various alternatives to address the research questions, I selected autoethnography. This method of inquiry was suitable in conducting a self-study or the story of self in relation to others in my position.

## Why autoethnography?

For the past twenty years, autoethnography has become a popular form of qualitative research (Anderson, 2006) influencing researchers across many disciplines. There has been a “burgeoning of autoethnographic projects that focus directly on the research and personal experiences of the researcher” (Ellis, 2012, p. 2). Many qualitative researchers “now position themselves in their research and include themselves as participants in their interview and ethnographic studies of others” (Ellis, 2012, p. 2). Autoethnographic research as a method is highly suited to educational research and capable of expanding knowledge of educational practice and life in general (Hamdan, 2012).

Autoethnography has the capacity to initiate positive, personal and transformative social change and engender dialogue (Starr, 2010). Sparkes (2002) states:

This kind of writing can inform, awaken, and disturb readers by illustrating their involvement in social processes about which they might not have been consciously aware. Once aware, individuals may find the consequences of their involvement (or lack of it) unacceptable and seek to change the situation. In such circumstances, the potential for individual and collective restorying is enhanced. (p. 221)

Autoethnography involves weaving the “bits and pieces” (hooks, 1989, p. 159) of the self and practice in a social setting in an attempt to provide evidence and analysis in research (Starr, 2010), which in this study was relevant to the understanding of my role as a superintendent of schools in relation to others. Through autoethnography my story and practice are respected and given a voice; I am allowed to speak in first-person; to rethink the past; to utilize autobiographical materials as the primary source of data; and, reflect, interpret and analyze my lived experiences as a superintendent of schools (Bochner, 2001; Chang, 2007; Cook, 2014;

Holt, 2003; Muncey, 2010). I am allowed to be authentic and rely on the subjectivity of the personal narrative (Bochner, 2012; Philaretou & Allen, 2005; Spry, 2001; Wall, 2006).

Autoethnography allowed me to “shift from participant observation to the observation of the participant” (Tedlock, 2000, p. 455). As Hamdan (2012) persuasively articulates: “This autoethnography demonstrates how narrative inquirers can build a knowledge base without relinquishing respect for the individual voice...which is the researcher’s voice in this context” (p. 586). This method allowed the naturally occurring realities of the superintendent’s activities, actions, and experience to be understood in a complete, richer, and deeper way that is not possible using other methods. Vryan (2006), forcefully argues:

If anyone else sought to study my life as an impostor, no amount of interviewing or observation of me by a researcher would have been capable of producing the depth, richness, and fullness of data I was able to assemble via fully-immersive (and documented) self-observation, self-interviewing, and self-analysis. (p. 407)

For these reasons, I selected autoethnography as the most suitable methodology for this study.

This autoethnographical study incorporated the elements of both the analytical and evocative autoethnographic traditions. Analytic autoethnography afforded me, as the researcher, the avenue to become engaged, visible, and active and reflect the narrative of the study within my written text (Anderson, 2006). Evocative autoethnography condoned the integration of my own personalized stories and lived experiences to explore the relationship of those experiences to the understanding of my role as superintendent (Dauphinee, 2010; Furman, 2015).

By combining the strengths and insights of both traditions, my autoethnography became a powerful tool for exploring my social and personal experience in a deeper manner as I performed my responsibilities as a superintendent of schools who was directly involved in the social

network of students in an attempt to understand their needs and incorporate their voices into my decisions. At the same time, I attempted to make meaning of the world of the superintendency as an agent of social capital from the perspective of self-analysis, self-reflection and inquiry.

### **Site Description**

The site of this study was a school district located in the southern border of the United States in west Texas. The school district's website describes the school district as a diverse, geographically large area (379.9 square miles) within the Upper Rio Grande border region, 25 miles east of El Paso, Texas. The district encompasses three major, separate, and distinct communities that include a stable farming and ranching area; a growing suburban area; and unincorporated communities in the county. For the past decade, the district has grown approximately fifteen hundred students or about 14% of a total student population of approximately twelve thousand students and has remained relatively stable in terms of student demographics. The district consists of approximately 87% economically disadvantaged, approximately 97% minority, predominately of Hispanic origin, about 34% limited English proficient, and about 62% at risk of dropping out of school, and with an ethnic composition of 2.3% White, 0.3% African American, 0.2% American Indian, and 0.1% Asian. The school district includes four high schools, four middle schools, six elementary schools and one alternative school. The workforce of the district consists of approximately 1,600 employees of which more than half are teachers.

### **Data Collection**

Autoethnographical study involves data collection of the researcher's own lived experiences, observations, and communications to gain understanding and make connections between others who share a common activity and one' self (Ngunjiri et al., 2010; Philaretou &

Allen, 2005; Wolcott, 2004). The experiences and stories of others are relevant to the understanding of the autoethnographer conducting the study “because people do not accumulate their experiences in a social vacuum” (Holt, 2003, p. 25).

Data collection for this study consisted of the traditional ethnographical data sources. These included observation field notes, documents, a research diary, participation, self-observation, and other artifacts (Chang, 2007; Wall, 2008). Other sources of inquiry included students’ emails, text messages, and student phone call logs and a weekly report of all my activities and personal recollections (Philaretou & Allen, 2005; Wall, 2008). Media coverage of the school district that involved the superintendent was included as well. In addition, a MAXQDA12 App (the App is a component of MAXQDA12, the research software I used for data analysis) was used on the iPhone to capture events not recorded on the journal notebook. The use of the app allowed the recording of events immediately after they took place and, for these particular activities, avoided the total reliance on memory to record the events in the journal at the end of the day. Information captured on the app was stored in the drop box making it readily accessible for review and analysis on my encrypted computer. The app was used only during the last year and a half of the research timeline. I used another app, Listaway, to track and follow up on students’ concerns or questions. This app allowed me to organize students by school, schedule visits with students, set reminders, and take notes. I also used the app to follow up with my administrative team during our weekly meetings.

Data collection began soon after I was named superintendent of schools in the fall of 2013, three months after I enrolled in the doctoral program. One of my professors suggested I should conduct an autoethnography, a study on my new position. While I had a general concept of social capital from a practitioner’s point of view, the doctoral program provided the platform

and theoretical understanding to fully understand and explore what that meant and then how to bridge that theory into my practice as a new superintendent of schools. I began to document all my weekly activities, including appointments and school visits. I did this by keeping a journal of activities and a weekly log of all my activities. I began to collect any newspaper articles related to my school district and any newsletters and Internet posts of the school district. Prior to the incorporation of MAXQDA12 Journal app, all my journaling was done using a traditional journal notebook.

One of the main sources of data for this study was self-observation or participant-observation. In ethnographic research, the researcher participates in the experiences of the researched subjects while gathering information on their experiences and behaviors. “In a similar fashion to this, autoethnographers can observe their own behaviors and document their thoughts while living them” (Chang, 2007, p. 34). The lived experiences in autoethnography do not occur in isolation from others. Just as traditional ethnographers do, the autoethnographer becomes acquainted with people, forms relationships, and participates as they engage in their daily lives.

Self-observations for this study included all my weekly activities, such as appointments, school visits, and field notes. Field notes included discussions, conversations with students during lunch in the school cafeterias and other settings, meetings, student requests and my responses. Emotions and feelings were included, as well (Anderson, 2006). I wrote field notes almost daily, sometimes retrospectively, following my conversations with students. I normally wrote my reflections at the end of the day. Careful consideration was given to protect the identity of all individuals who may be recognizable in the written narrative and who may not have consented “to being portrayed in ways that would reveal their identity” (Ellis, 2007, p. 14). For the most part, the names of the students were not included in my writings to protect their

identity. I only wrote the names of students if I needed to follow up with them relative to their concerns or questions. For this study, I created fictitious names of students and altered the location of events to protect the identity of students and school personnel.

Field Notes: Field notes are one of the primary tools of narrative autoethnography. For this study, some field notes were recorded in an “active” format without interpretation, including the emotions and feelings and reactions of the researcher (Anderson, 2006). In a sense, they formed an active reconstruction of my lived experiences in relation to my work (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). While Connelly and Clandinin (1990) view field notes as “active recordings” (p. 5) that can be “recorded without the researcher’s interpretation,” (p. 5), others suggests that documenting lived experiences in the form of field notes involves more than writing facts, but rather, writing significant events, interpreting them, and making sense of them (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Data collection for this study involved both suggestions.

Some of the field notes were interpreted as they were being recorded and others were not. For example, on September 13, 2016, during my lunch visits to one of the high schools, a student requested to have lunch with me. We both sat down for lunch and the student began to tell me that the school had treated her unfairly when her counselor denied credits she earned during the summer. She stated she was “being forced to repeat a class” she had already taken. I suggested she speak to administration, and she said that she already had and that they agreed with the counselor to not grant her credit. I told her that I would request an analysis of her credits and get back to her. Since she already had my cell phone number, I asked her to remind me in the event she did not hear from me by the end of the day. The analysis of credits proved the student was correct. She should not have been required to repeat the class. As a result, the administration was directed to grant the student credit and to enroll the student in another class as she requested.

Reflecting on the incident, I reached the conclusion that solving one incident was not sufficient if other students were in the same predicament. As a result, I directed an audit of the counselor's records. In other cases, not much reflection was needed even though the topic, at least in my first year as superintendent, was the most discussed by students during my lunch visits with them. For example, high school seniors often requested I change the policy of the school district and allow them to leave school for lunch. In this case, the vast majority of the community and the entire school board are in favor of maintaining all schools as "closed campuses." Since I eat with students almost every day, I knew the quality and variety of food we served. With approximately 98% student participation in the lunch program, there was no need to change the practice of the school district. This last example, while collected and coded on my field notes, did not seem relevant for the purposes of my study. I focused my reflections on cases where the students would get the most benefit out their interactions with me.

Part of my reflections included asking questions such as: "Did I act on the students' behalf when they brought their concerns to me today?" "What must be done to avoid similar problems for other students?" "What must I change in the structure of the school or the district to avoid the problem I encountered today?" Regardless of the reflection process, field notes represent the researchers' construction of their own lived reality (Muncey, 2010); this is a form of social imperative that seeks, not scientific proof via autoethnographic research through the analysis of one's own experiences (Emerson et al., 1995), but rather, a better understanding of life's challenges (Bochner, 2012; Davies, 2008). In this particular case, it provided a better understanding of the superintendent of schools as an agent of social capital for all students and low socioeconomic and minority students in particular. In the field journal I kept, most entries began with "I met" or "met with" followed by a description of the meeting with students. The

nature of the meetings focused on a variety of topics. Salient among my discussions included academics, high school credits, discipline, school rules and requirements, drugs, college, family matters, and complaints concerning school personnel.

Journal: Maintaining a journal was critical for this study. It allowed me to document in detail the events of the day, and at the same time reflect on my activities. The following comment illustrates a typical entry in my journal:

Met with Anthony high school senior. Missing hours for graduation. Problems at home with parents divorcing. Works at a restaurant to help mother pay bills. Smart kid... Needs to complete financial aid application. Why has he not completed it? Find out. He should have been advised a long time ago. Who is responsible? Follow up. I had a long conversation with him about his future plans. He discussed his responsibility to find a job and care for his mother. He has plenty of dual credits courses. I am angry; it's stupid, it's stupid, why does this kid need to be in charge of the family simply because of the stupid decisions of his father. (Field journal entry, May 9, 2016)

Anthony graduated from high school. I almost lost track of him, and often wondered what happened to him. His phone contacts were disconnected and the family moved. However, approximately a year after his graduation, while I was visiting with parents after school dismissal at an elementary school, I saw him again. That same day, I wrote another journal entry about him as follows:

I was glad to see Anthony today at dismissal. It's been a while since I last spoke to him. He was picking up his sister who is in third grade. I'm glad he followed through with college. Anthony is going to EPCC. Great news! Follow up with him and his sister. (Field journal entry, April 10, 2017)

Interviews: Chang (2008) notes that interviews are “not commonly associated with autoethnography because this research method focuses primarily on one’s own life, while interviews are usually used to draw out life experiences from other people” (p. 106).

Autoethnography can also be seen as being evocative, which “seeks narrative fidelity only to the researcher’s subjective experience” (Anderson, 2006, p. 386), but not the alternative conception of analytical autoethnography, which extends beyond the self and elicits the perspectives of others (Anderson, 2006). However, both traditions acknowledge the contributions of interviews in the writing of autoethnography, although they “fulfill a different goal” (Chang, 2007, p. 35; Wall, 2008). In this case, however, I did not conduct formal interviews of other people. I relied primarily on data collected from my own experiences on the day-to-day interactions with students and actions I took on the students’ behalf. This method allowed me a much deeper, richer, and more complete understanding of my own role as an agent of social capital than is possible via other methods. Vryan (2006) states: “autoethnography enables access to vital aspects of human experience that cannot be accessed using other available methods” (p. 407).

Though this study relied on traditional methods of data gathering, autoethnography does not demand a standard adherence to a prescribed form (Chang, 2008). The idiosyncrasies of autoethnographic research can be achieved by the development of the researcher’s own techniques of data collection (Chang, 2007). I recorded the events as they unfolded and recorded only the events, often emotional and personal, that I thought were important, relevant, meaningful and made sense to me. I recorded only the events that had an impact on the students as a result of their interactions with me. As stated earlier, I focused on recording events and reflections on cases where the students would get the most benefit out of their interactions with me. I reasoned that being visible as a superintendent is not enough, as an agent of social capital, I

recorded events only where I used my authority, position, and status to benefit and support students. In other words, I created my own method and theory of data collection that worked for me, and I recorded only what I perceived as relevant. I followed Mills' (1959) conception of research:

Be a good craftsman: avoid any rigid set of procedures. Above all, seek to develop and use the sociological imagination. Avoid the fetishism of method and technique. Urge the rehabilitation of the unpretentious intellectual craftsman, and try to become such a craftsman yourself. Let every man be his own methodologist; let every man be his own theorist; let theory and method again become part of the practice of a craft. Stand for the primacy of the individual scholar; stand against the ascendancy of research teams of technicians. Be one mind that is on its own confronting the problems of man and society. (pp. 245-6)

While Mills' proposals were viewed as radical in the 1960's, different subject areas of research developed, evolved, and adapted in such a form many years later (Molnar & Purdy, 2015). For example, in discussing Mills (1959) concepts of research in nursing, Lipscomb (2017) states that "the social researcher's most important data collection tool is him-or herself, but Mills actually meant it" (p. 38) when Mills (1959) stated:

What this means is that you must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work; continually to examine and interpret it. In this sense craftsmanship is the center of your self and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you may work. To say that you 'have experience', means, for one thing, that your past plays and defines your capacity for future experience. (p. 216)

## **Data Analysis**

All data sources were transcribed to Microsoft Word and then exported to MAXQDA 12 data analysis software. MAXQDA 12 enabled the effective and efficient management of the data. It facilitated sorting the data, the analytical coding process, and identification of significant patterns and topics. Topics were then organized in categories, themes, and by-themes to make sense of the text (Philaretou & Allen, 2005; Smith, 1994), to form a deeper understanding of the central issue under consideration and to help answer the major research questions (Creswell, 2012). This analysis “looked to identify threads that can be woven together to tell a story about the observed social world” (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 142) of the superintendent of schools. Data analysis was conducted in an inductive manner. This means that categories, themes, by-themes, and patterns emerged from the data and the categories that surfaced from field notes. Conversations and documents were not imposed prior to the collection of data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

A process of self-reflection then followed the process of data disaggregation. This emotional undertaking is considered the “heart of autoethnographic storytelling” (Bochner, 2012, p. 161). This is a process by which autoethnography is rendered as inquiry; where something is being inquired into, given an interpretation, made sense of, and judged (Bochner, 2012). This is the process by which the story of self becomes coherent and meaningful out of all the lived experiences and recollections of the researcher (Muncey, 2010). As I coded and examined the data I also adopted a data analysis method espoused by Furman (2015) in which I initially interpreted and coded the data using MAXQDA 12, then I took a “cooling off” period before examining the data again. “This was done to allow for a bit of distance by which to view the text with fresh eyes” (p. 109). After this process, the data was coded again without looking at the first

set of analytical codes. The two sets of codes were then compared and additional reflective notes were written to look for any discrepancies between the two sets of codes. After a period of reflection and analysis, the final themes were developed to make sense of the meaning of the data. This reflection and analysis helped me to make sense of the data and helped inform me of the role as a superintendent of schools as an agent of social capital.

### **Limitations**

Although autoethnography has gained significant popularity as a useful method of research (Pace, 2012) and acceptance in social science research, it has limitations that should be considered. The immediate limitation of this method is the wide divide that persists between evocative and analytical autoethnographic traditions. In general, autoethnography refers almost exclusively to evocative autoethnography; some contend that this genre lacks the traditional analytical goals (Anderson, 2006; Muncey, 2010). To address these concerns, analytical autoethnography was introduced as an alternative. However, the divide between the two traditions generated a plethora of challenges from both camps, creating confusion and a lack of clear guidelines for the researcher. Others have argued that the divide does not demand exclusive allegiance to one or the other, nor does it compel the researcher to favor the dominant viewpoints of the traditional evocative majority such as Ellis (1999, Spry (2001), and Denzin (2006). Others encourage the inclusion of strengths and insights from both camps to meet the aims of the phenomenon being studied (Furman, 2015; Holt, 2003). I have followed the latter recommendation for this study.

Another limitation of this study is the possibility of insider bias and the charge of self-indulgent study compounded by the indirect risk of utilizing my engagement with students and others for self-aggrandizement. However, steps were taken to conduct a study that avoided these

perceived deficits. While autoethnography plays a vital role in the understanding of the role of the superintendency, different research techniques could help to understand better the role of the superintendent of schools as an agent of social capital.

Another concern arises from the limitation of the superintendent's ability to have a meaningful impact as an agent of social capital for students on a larger scale. Even a ubiquitous superintendent would not be able to address all student issues in their manifold expressions. This study is intended to re-conceptualize my role as superintendent as an agent of social capital, which role traditionally has been relegated to school figures such as teachers, counselors, and social workers. However, the superintendent, by virtue of the position, is able to expand the social capital afforded to students by engaging directly, not only in the first three domains associated with the role of institutional agents as described in Chapter Two of this study, but also by developing programs that integrate students in the system of institutional agents that support students. In doing so, the superintendent is able to establish a culture of systematic change where school administrators and others see themselves as agents of social capital as well. In my particular case, it was imperative to establish a culture of support for all students whereby all employees, particularly administrators, transformed their own roles to become agents of social capital. As a result, I began to promote a team concept since my first address to the entire faculty and staff at the annual summer convocation. In explaining the district's vision, I emphasized that:

A 'team' is not just people who work at the same time in the same place. A real team is a group of very different individuals who share a commitment to working together to achieve common goals. Most likely they are not all equal in experience, talent or education, but they are equal in one vitally important way, their commitment to the good of the organization. (Fripp, n.d., para. 4)

Shortly after the school year began, a mentoring program was designed and implemented as a support mechanism for at-risk students. As indicated in the mentoring program manual, the program consists of district administrators who take a supportive role in the mentoring of students beyond academics. Mentors met with district students and completed activities, which allowed students to interact with positive role models. Following the District's vision of "Together We Build Tomorrow" the mentoring program outcomes were as follows:

- Enhance the healthy development of children and youth through mentoring relationships and provide a path to post-secondary education or career options.
- Ensure support systems are in place to assist students academically, emotionally, and socially.
- Equally important are the outcomes that both the mentor and the mentee can experience through a relationship-building program. The mentor also can grow as a professional and learn more about the community, student needs, and issues which impact our District.

I believe that, despite the shortcomings and limitations of autoethnography, my study will contribute to the practice of school superintendents and the understanding of their roles as agents of social capital for all students, particularly, low-socioeconomic, at-risk, and minority students.

## Chapter 4: The Journey Continues

*“In using oneself as an ethnographic exemplar, the researcher is freed from the traditional conventions of writing. One’s unique voicing—complete with colloquialisms, reverberations from multiple relationships, and emotional expressiveness—is honored”* (Gergen & Gergen, 2002, p. 14).

### Introduction

This chapter begins with a continuation of the narrative of my arrival in Whittier, California, followed by a review of the experiences that shaped my view of my role as superintendent. Next, I described my interactions with students as I attempted to understand their needs and discussed the outcomes that emerged from those interactions. I also described my involvement with administrators and the community. Finally, I included my experiences dealing with student tragedies.

Many of the stories in this chapter involved conversations with students, which subsequently informed administrative action on my part, ranging from instructional intervention to decisions regarding personnel. However, I did not rely on student voices alone. Multiple sources, such as discussions with staff, board members, and citizens, informed my final decisions on various issues. Observations, audits, and investigations also provided facts, figures and findings. This chapter offers examples of how student input became a significant source of information but was not the only factor in the choices I made to improve the district’s educational programs and to enhance the lives of students, both at school and at home.

This chapter describes my work as an agent of social capital in a high minority school district with large numbers of economically disadvantaged students. In the review of literature, I offer several definitions of social capital. However, for purposes of this study, I embraced one particular meaning. Stanton-Salazar (2011) defined social capital as “consisting of resources and key forms of social support embedded in one’s network or associations, and accessible through

direct or indirect ties with institutional agents” (p. 1067). In terms of being an agent, I also relied on Stanton-Salazar (2011). Superintendents become institutional agents only when they mobilize the support of the institution, use their power and authority, position, status and reputation for the benefit, and support of students (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Since Stanton-Salazar studied minority and underprivileged children in relation to social capital, I believe these definitions are particularly relevant and applicable for the purposes of my study.

A reader may get the impression that I am constantly “switching gears” as I offer my narrative. My story, especially when discussing my work as superintendent, at times does move quickly from one subject or issue to another. I believe these sudden changes in the narrative capture the essence of the superintendent’s day. Although schedules are made and activities organized, unanticipated events do change the best of plans; the superintendent must be flexible enough to successfully maneuver through a system with constant and changing demands and competing priorities. Being an agent of social capital tends to compound this uncertainty.

### **High School Years**

In Chapter One, I told the story of my formative years living with my grandmother in Mexico and introduced you to the first part of my experiences while living in Whittier, California, as a new immigrant. This section describes my high school years in California and Texas.

#### **La Serna High School – Whittier, California**

A couple of months after my arrival at La Serna High School, I joined the soccer team, I was not the best player, though. I was benched for most games. It did not matter; Coach Ted, as we called him, was a wonderful and caring person. I was happy just being part of the team, which helped me adapt to my new reality. Being a member of the soccer team facilitated my

connections with peers who only spoke English, which fostered my acquisition of this new language. Interestingly, one of my best friends was Long, a student from Viet Nam. He did not speak Spanish or English, and of course, I did not speak Vietnamese or English. We did our best to communicate with each other. Unfortunately, Long and I did not keep in touch after I returned to El Paso.

At home, my father's wife was a wonderful person and treated me almost like her own son. My younger half-brothers, however, did not speak Spanish well, so our communication was somewhat limited and we interacted only if necessary. Unfortunately, living with my father did not work out for me. He did not seem to realize that his words were very hurtful. "You will never accomplish anything," he said during a conversation. "Your grandmother spoiled you," "Your grandmother is healthy because she has never worked." Our conversations were mostly negative, filled with criticism of my grandmother, my hometown in Mexico, or of me in general.

My resentment towards my father grew even stronger than what it was before I moved to Whittier to join him. Close to the end of the school year, he insisted I would not return to Mexico to visit my grandmother during the summer. I pled my case with my father until he finally agreed. However, after the summer ended, my father informed my mother I was no longer welcome to return to his house. My brother was welcome, I was not. Unable to attend school or find employment in the small town, I had no other option but to move to Texas to live with my mother in her one-bedroom apartment. The living area became my room and the sofa my bed. She worked as a housekeeper in a hotel earning minimum wage and could not afford rent for a larger apartment.

## **El Paso High School – El Paso, Texas**

My mother enrolled me in El Paso High School. I immediately fell in love with its majestic architecture. However, I always felt like an outsider. My feelings were probably the result of my own insecurities rather than the environment of the school. I found comfort as a member of the cross-country team. Coach McKillip, or “Coach,” as we called him, was demanding and expected nothing but our best effort.

I appreciated that Coach attempted to communicate with me, even if he did not speak Spanish. “Andele,” he would say when the team slowed down. He became a father figure, a person I looked up to for structure, expectations, goal setting, hard work, and for his no excuses approach to life. I appreciated his kindness and altruistic spirit.

### **Back to California: The Beginning of my Work and Spiritual Life**

With the support of my mother and the guidance of caring educators, such as Coach McKillip, I managed to graduate from high school. I did not have a job and was searching for a way to support myself. As stated, my mother lived modestly with little income. I did not want to be a financial burden on her. I had to find my own way in the world.

### **Living conditions**

Soon after I graduated from El Paso High School, my older brother lured me back to California with the promise of employment in a factory warehouse where he worked. Not having any place to live, I stayed in a house rented by migrant workers. About twenty people lived in the house, everyone slept on the floor. I did not want to live in those conditions. I swallowed my pride and asked my father if I could live with him. However, I did not want to bother him or his family so asked if I could stay in “the little house outside.” He agreed and fixed up this small structure. I did not know that the 6-foot by 12-foot building was, in fact, a shed. My father

eventually moved to a larger house, where I had my own room. Living conditions were not my only challenge during this period of my life, I was soon to be confronted by the cold reality of the world.

### **Confronting the vices of the real world**

Soon after my factory work commenced, the world of illegal drugs touched my life for the first time. One of the “suppliers” asked me to go to the back of the factory where he offered me a variety of drugs “for free.” Crack, cocaine, and marijuana were on the menu. Fortunately, I remembered my grandmother’s words: “You may be poor, but you are not stupid, never do drugs.” Frightened and intimidated by the “supplier,” I politely declined and ran back to my workstation. The “supplier” continued to pursue me with the offer of “free” drugs for a few months. I never acquiesced. I refused to be one of the many factory workers who cashed the check with the supplier at the end of the week to pay for weekend drugs. My grandmother’s lessons worked to strengthen me in this instance, but I sought a more permanent support system; something that would provide much needed guidance and wisdom to a young man trying to find his way in what can be, as one of my students put it, “a brutal world.”

### **Finding purpose in the church**

Feeling lost, confused and without a sense of purpose, I joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church. On my first visit, I was asked to sit in the front pews reserved for the young people. The pastor, who was also a college professor, often spoke of the value of higher education in conjunction with the importance of spiritual life and personal responsibility. These practical messages drew me to the church every weekend. Scriptural verses, such as “For I know the plans I have for you” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you

hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:19) appealed to me, and I began to believe in a “hope and a future” that was foreign to me before I joined the church.

After a few visits to the church, I met my best friend Jessie, his wife, and two children. Jessie and his wife unofficially adopted me as part of their family. I spent most weekends at his house. I often took care of his children and mowed the grass. Jessie became a mentor and, being approximately twenty years older, he became a father figure during the most challenging time of my youth.

It was very evident my father did not approve of my affiliation with the church. The situation created additional tension between us. One night I was invited to go skating with a church group and I accepted. I called my father to let him know that I would be home around 10. When I arrived at the house, I found all the doors, gates, and windows locked. I could not get into my own home. That night, I left his house and never returned. I went to live with my older brother who rented an apartment in partnership with another family.

As part of the church’s outreach, it sponsored an annual trip to La Sierra University, a church-owned institution in Riverside, California. This trip allowed me and many other young people to stay for a week in the dorms, eat in the cafeteria, and visit classrooms to interact with students and university professors. The visit to the university enabled me to see and experience a world that I had never known before. During the visit, I was almost indoctrinated to believe that going to college was a divine mandate. With the encouragement of the pastor, I returned to Texas with the sole intention of attending college and the university.

### **Higher Education and Love**

I enrolled at El Paso Community College and worked at a fast food restaurant. I also worked in maintenance at the hotel where my mother worked as a housekeeper. Eventually, I

transferred to The University of Texas at El Paso. While at the university, I met a young woman at church who also motivated me to continue in school. “I will never marry you if you don’t finish college,” she said. She certainly provided additional motivation to finish. We got married a month after we both graduated from the university.

I graduated with a Bachelor’s degree in Business Administration, and then, with the encouragement of my wife, I pursued a career in education. Three years later, I obtained a teaching certification and earned a Master’s of Education degree. Nine years later, after I felt I had gained sufficient school administrative experience; I returned to school and received superintendent’s certification from Angelo State University.

### **Becoming Superintendent**

The superintendent is the chief executive officer of a school district who reports to the school board. Prior to becoming a superintendent, I served as a teacher, assistant principal, principal, and director of human resources. I also served as chief of human resources for a larger school district of approximately 42,000 students. The combined time in these positions equates to twenty years of service in public education. The appointment to each position was exciting, challenging, and sometimes overwhelming. Nonetheless, I enjoyed learning the ropes of each of these positions. I always perceived these roles as “on the job training” in preparation for my ultimate goal of becoming a superintendent.

Regardless of the progressive nature of my professional career and the apparent success I had enjoyed, I continued to have doubts about ever becoming a superintendent. Perhaps unconsciously, the environment surrounding my upbringing exerted a much larger influence on me than I was willing to admit or I was simply looking for a pretext to justify my own

insecurities. Nonetheless, I silenced my lingering doubts and, with the encouragement of my wife, applied for a vacant superintendent position in a local school district.

This was the first time that I applied for a superintendent's position. I rationalized that I had nothing to lose if I were not selected. After a long application process, characterized by uncertainty, speculation, and anxiety, I was one of three finalists selected for an interview. Of course, I was still doubtful my chances but encouraged when the district called to schedule an interview with the Board of Trustees. The protracted five-hour interview was physically exhausting and mentally draining. However, this rigorous process provided the confidence to believe in me.

On June 27, 2013, the Board of Trustees chose me as the sole finalist. After waiting twenty-one days as required by state law, on July 18, 2013, during a regularly scheduled meeting of the Board of Trustees, I was offered an employment contract by the school district. As soon as the contract was approved, I was invited to take the superintendent's seat at the head of the boardroom table with the Board of Trustees.

Among my overwhelming positive emotions, were darker inner thoughts I could not suppress fixating on the ghostly echo of my father's voice; "You will never accomplish anything." Perhaps he was correct at that particular moment in time. The grim reality of my precarious upbringing undoubtedly predicted a different outcome; my father was simply expressing his despondent expectations for me. My conjecture was that he felt I could not possibly accomplish much because I did not grow up with him. However, his injurious words motivated me and pushed me, not to prove that he was wrong, but rather, to honor my grandmother who raised me and to express my gratitude for my mother who sacrificed so much for my two older brothers and me.

Despite the substantial obstacles of my formative years, characterized by extreme poverty and a broken family, compounded by the challenges of being an immigrant in a new country with serious English language deficiencies, here I was, the newly named superintendent of schools!

On July 20, 2013, the local newspaper published an article of my appointment (Hinojosa, 2013). The article included a description of my selection and appointment along with my background and experience. The article also alluded to the turbulence the district was facing with the school community and referred to matters related to the former superintendent. Nonetheless, I was excited and felt I was ready to confront the challenges facing the school district.

### **Early Experiences of My Superintendency**

The exuberance of being named superintendent and the intrusive recollection of my childhood experience were short-lived. An immense sense of responsibility of my new position quickly suppressed these feelings. The immediate demands of the job permitted no time for celebrations or for recalling the good and bad of my past.

### **Regaining trust: Managing the fallout from a finance equity lawsuit**

My first day on the job was August 1, 2013. In the early stages of my new position, it became increasingly evident that I had to regain the trust and confidence of the community, and more importantly, the trust of students. Prior to my arrival, the district was involved in a public controversy leading to a lawsuit that gained national attention. In part, the lawsuit alleged that the Board of Trustees did not fund students equitably across the three communities of the school district. As a result, there were forewarnings that the very public nature of the lawsuit against the district generated a wide range of opinions in favor of or against the school district. School board meetings were highly contentious.

Initially, the State District Court dismissed the lawsuit in favor of the school district. However, on appeal, the 8th Court of Appeals reversed the ruling in favor of the plaintiffs. The district then appealed to the Texas Supreme Court. Regardless of the timing of the lawsuit, which was filed before my arrival, I was now the superintendent of schools; I could not discount my responsibility to address the issue.

In an attempt to understand the motivation behind this litigation, I began to question my own role as a superintendent. I sought answers from the perspective that I was now accountable to the community, parents, students, and staff; even if I was not the superintendent at the time of the filing. Fortunately, I had just enrolled in my second semester as a doctoral student. The program required students to read widely about school matters and, in my particular case, the role of the superintendent.

### **Defining my role as superintendent**

In preparation for one of my class discussions, I read a dissertation, an autoethnography, related to the role of school superintendents. I was somewhat bothered, but not surprised, to read the assertion that “students, parents, and even teachers do not know who the superintendent is or what he does, except for some vague notion of being the big boss” (Rose, 2011, p. 3). Is it possible that such description might be an accurate portrayal of the role of the superintendent of schools? I reflected back to my high school years and, in fact, I don’t remember ever hearing about or meeting the superintendent of schools. I also began to ask others, including my staff, if they remember who the superintendent was when they were in high school. No one remembered. I asked myself if this was the fate that awaited me. Why did I choose to be a superintendent in the first place, and what was my purpose? Was it a job or a mission? What was my role?

I reflected on these questions and trembled at the thought of this perception of indifference by parents, teachers, and more importantly, students. I also reflected on a comment by a colleague who told me that the superintendency was an “easy job,” all you had to do was to “kiss the board members’ ass.” Another acquaintance indicated that while enrolled in the superintendent certification program at a certain university, the professor told him not to worry about school district matters and board issues because, “it is their district, their schools, their students, not yours.” As I reflected on those comments, I thought of my grandmother. What would she say? She would advise: “no te metas en problemas, ¿ya comiste?” (Don’t get into trouble. Did you eat already?) This was my grandmother’s unique way of saying: “do your job and do it well and everything will be ok.” I would soon find that a student named Antonio would provide much needed clarity in terms of defining my role as superintendent.

#### **Antonio: My first encounter with a student as superintendent**

During my first visits to one of the high schools, I walked into the front office, greeted everyone and introduced myself. The office staff was polite and respectful. I immediately noticed a student sitting to the side just looking down. The student basically ignored my presence. I reached out to the student and introduced myself. Apparently, the student was in trouble, and I was told that he was in the office waiting for an administrator. I requested to meet with the student in private. The secretary guided us to an empty office.

Once again I introduced myself, and he did the same. His name was Antonio. During the conversation, I could sense anger by Antonio’s facial expression. As we began to talk, without hesitation Antonio stated, “There is no purpose for school, Mr.” and “No one listen(s) to us here, who cares?” After Antonio finished the long tirade of accusations against the school, the administration, and the school district, I replied: “It seems to me that you have very valid reasons

to be angry. I would be angry too if I were treated the way you have been. I promise you I am listening and I will do something to assist you.”

Then I asked, “Tell me about your parents.” “What does that have to do with anything, Mr.?” “Nothing, just wondering,” I replied. “What do you want to know?” he said. “I don’t know; just tell me whatever you wish to share about your family.” Reluctantly, Antonio stated: “I live with my mother and my grandmother.” “What about your father?” I asked. Antonio answered: “I don’t want to talk about him.” I interjected and said: “It hurts, doesn’t it?” The student looked down and replied “Yeah.” “I know exactly what you are telling me son. Let me tell you my own story. Then you tell me yours and then we will compare the two.” At the end of our long emotional conversation, Antonio simply stated: “My story is not as bad after all. Thank you, Mr. for speaking to me. What’s your name again?”

As Antonio left the office and I moved on to other activities, the echo of his personal story reverberated in my mind the rest of the day. The next day, I returned to the same school to follow up with Antonio and the administration. While the matter was resolved in his favor, I knew that the outcome was the result of my intervention. As a result of this first interaction with Antonio, I left the school convinced that listening to students and acting on their behalf would be my priority over any other function of the district. I reasoned that if all personnel, beginning with the superintendent, spent more time listening to the students’ stories, understanding their backgrounds and challenges, and knowing their expectations and needs, the district would become more effective and able to respond to the educational and emotional needs of our students, particularly, the most vulnerable. From this point forward, I was determined that my role as superintendent would include positioning myself directly in the network of students.

I made a conscious decision that my administration would consider students as stakeholders and partners in decision-making, and I would role model my expectations for my staff by constantly meeting with students. I would make decisions considering the students' feedback. I made a promise to myself that the unfavorable reputation of the role of superintendents as described in the dissertation or the comments I heard would not apply to me. I made a commitment that my daily activities would include visiting schools, listening to students, and understanding their needs, school experiences, and even their wishes for their school or the school district. I resolved that my new job would not be merely a perfunctory superintendency, but rather a superintendency that gave priority to the students' voices in my decision-making. Explicitly or tacitly, I wanted students to know that I was not just "the big boss," a distant figure, an unapproachable person, but rather, a superintendent who was willing to listen and advocate for them.

### **Committing to authentically and actively connecting with students**

During my initial meetings with the central office, I informed the staff and the cabinet that most of my time would be spent visiting schools on a daily basis. A member of the cabinet asked if I needed the photographer to drive me to the schools and accompany me. I politely smiled and said, "Thank you. I know where the schools are. I don't think I need an escort." I also informed the principals that I would be visiting schools daily. Immediately, I sensed a level of resistance or worry from the principals. However, I instructed them to focus on their work, not my visits. They were told to not interrupt their work or do anything special for my visits. I informed them that the focus of the district was our students, not the superintendent.

During my first month on the job, I visited every school and every classroom to introduce myself to the students as the new superintendent of schools. I continued the practice of visiting

every classroom at the beginning of the school year. I also established a practice of eating lunch with students in the school cafeterias every day to hear their perceptions of the climate and culture of schools. Apparently, this was a novelty. When staff and others asked me why I was eating with students, my answer was simply, “If the food is good for the students, the food is good for me.”

For at least the first two months of school visitations, I heard many disturbing comments expressed by students and teachers about my predecessor’s school visits. On one occasion, while I was at an elementary school, a line of kindergarten students passed by in front of me in the main hallway. I noticed a student had his shoelaces untied. I asked the student to move to the side then I crouched down on one knee. I asked the student to place his foot on top of my other knee; then I tied his shoelaces. The teacher sarcastically commented, “Where is your photographer? That is a perfect photo op.” The teacher noticed my discomfort with the comment and then stated: “I am sorry, but that would have been a perfect photo op for the previous superintendent.”

As I continued visiting schools, the comments from teachers, students and parents were relentless. The most persistent question was why the photographer did not accompany me to the campuses. On one particular occasion, a teacher apologized to me for asking me about the photographer and told of an instance when students “were pulled out of my class for a picture with the superintendent for no other reason than a photo op.”

While I was narrating my experiences during a discussion in one of my doctoral classes, peers who worked for other districts commented on the requirements that former superintendents imposed on campus administrations for their visits. According to the conversation, some superintendents coordinated all visits between the central office and the schools. Central office

staff normally accompanied the superintendent to campuses. The schools were required to provide a podium, an audience, a welcoming committee, and even an opened bottle of water at the podium for the superintendent.

I was more determined than ever to eliminate or avoid unnecessary protocols for my school visits. From the very beginning of my tenure, I purposely wanted to establish an environment where my visits were customary and normal to the staff and students. I informed my staff that for most days of the week, I would not be in the office until after student dismissal at the end of the day or I would not go to the office at all. Visiting with students, parents, administrators and classroom teachers would occupy much of my time during the school day. I adopted the expression, “If I perceive the school district from the perspective of my beautiful office, the district looks perfect.” My communication was via phone, through text and email or at the end of the day, in the office. I wanted to look at the district from the ground up and not just from the view above. A young lady named Maria provided such a vantage point.

### **Maria: A cry for hope**

As students began to trust that I was visiting schools to listen and act on their behalf, I could see the results of my efforts. Shortly after one of my visits to a fifth-grade class, I received an email from Maria. She asked me to give her “a chance to go to six(th)” grade. On a subsequent email, I could sense Maria’s agony and despair. Maria begged, “Give me hope and tell me with your power you can send me” to the sixth grade level. After an investigation of Maria’s situation, staff informed me that she remained in first grade “for language reasons.” As a fifth grader, Maria was far more mature than her peers and desperately wanted to advance to the middle school. After reviewing her case, I made the decision to move Maria to the middle school. The school administration objected to my decision arguing that Maria was not

academically ready. I communicated my decision to Maria's parents. After my conversation with the parents, I was infuriated at the previous school administration. Maria's parents attempted to speak on behalf of their daughter at the time of the grade retention meeting and "no one listened." That night, I received the following email from Maria:

"Dear Juan Martinez,

Thank you for the new opportunity you gave me. I promise I will do my best...I will not let you down."

I responded,

"I know you will do your best. I look forward to seeing you graduate from High School and then College."

### **Maria prompts a review of student retention policy**

Soon after the interaction with Maria, I reviewed all the student retentions of the past five years. I determined a correlation of approximately sixty percent between student retentions at any grade level with high school dropouts. I discovered that in one elementary school over thirty students were retained in just one year. Ironically, the practice of retaining students was contrary to the policy of the school board, which had established a goal of eliminating the practice of retaining students. Yet apparently the policy had been ignored for years prior to my arrival. I informed the principals that any student proposed for retention must have a portfolio of interventions and actions from the teacher and the administration prior to considering this action. According to the directive, principals were to review each portfolio with me, and I would make the final decision.

At the end of the year, principals retained three students without my authorization. The meeting with the administrators who failed to comply was not pleasant. One of the principals attempted to justify that two of the first-grade students qualified for special education services and left the district "anyway." I was even more upset. In the absence of a portfolio for each

student, I persistently questioned the principal in an effort to find a rational justification. Unable to provide a satisfactory answer, the principal responded: “I failed these students.” Eventually, the principal left the district. While grappling with policy issues and noncompliant principals, I learned through my continued interactions with students that the lawsuit issue had reached the student body. Its ubiquitous presence demanded action.

### **Revisiting the lawsuit controversy**

In an attempt to build stronger connections with students, I felt it was imperative to engage with them in a variety of settings in addition to having lunch with them. Therefore, attending sporting events and after-school functions at the three comprehensive high schools and the early college became part of my routine. These events set the stage for me to become a familiar face, thus increasing the likelihood of comfortable, non-threatening conversations. Through interactions with students, the equity issues compelling the lawsuit against the school rose repeatedly. It was evident that many students had questions regarding the fair distribution of funds among the schools. Students were well aware of this litigation against the school district and expressed their discontent to me openly and candidly.

In the midst of the lawsuit controversy, the school board president suggested calling for a public election on the sale of bonds to finance the construction and renovation of school facilities across the district. With the students’ discontent and the unfavorable climate towards the school district reverberating in my mind, I expressed my concerns and proposed delaying the bond issue until the following year. Thankfully, the board president agreed. This delay gave me the opportunity to work with the school community and to repair the image of the school district. More importantly, it gave me time to address the students’ lack of confidence and trust in the

school district. A successful passage of the bond would signal a vote of confidence in the school district and its administration.

### **Finance equity: Analyzing the numbers**

Soon after my meeting with the board president, I directed the chief financial officer to conduct an exhaustive review of all finances. The results were to include per-pupil allocations for all schools from local, state and federal funding sources to assess if the accusations were true. I was determined to correct the funding discrepancies if they did in fact exist. I could not be part of a system that did not fund its schools equitably and did not provide comparable educational opportunities for all students, particularly low socioeconomic and at-risk students. After examining emerging reports, I was convinced that the district's allocations to schools were equitable and distributed in a fair manner.

It became immediately evident to me that personnel salaries to student ratios were the contributory factor giving the impression of inequality of funding. Personnel salaries equated to over 80 percent of the district's budget. Teachers, administrators, counselors, and other employees are paid on a salary scale based on the number of years of service in the state, not on the number of students they serve. For example, a principal who earns 90,000 dollars at school A with a student enrollment of 600 students and a principal who earns the same salary at school B with a student enrollment of 1,500 students will give the impression that school A receives more funding based on the student population of each school.

A superficial and uninformed review of the salary structure of the district may lead to the impression of inequality. However, a deeper and more comprehensive analysis reveals that the allocation of funds per student across the district was indeed appropriate and justified.

### **Finance equity: Explaining the facts**

I decided to have faculty meetings and community meetings to explain the budget process and allocations at each campus and the three communities of the district. Regardless of explanations, perceptions of disparities continued. Media coverage only compounded an already general sense of distrust, resentment, and dissatisfaction among a large portion of the community. Unfortunately, the student body and staff felt the same sentiment. Exploring ways to regain the community's trust, and more importantly, the students' faith, kept me up at night. Finding ways to reverse such negative views would be difficult. Nonetheless, I continued meeting with students during lunch, after school, and during sporting activities. My prompt responses to the lawsuit issue and various other student concerns began to bear fruit as evidenced by warmer and more productive interactions with students.

### **Authentic engagement with students: Evidence of success**

Students became accustomed to seeing me so often that during a school function at one of the high schools, a student remarked, "I haven't seen you wearing that suit, is it new?" The student did not know that the person seated next to me was a board member. Of course, I loved it. The same student then stated: "You should be our principal, we see you more than we see our principal." Based on this comment from the student and on my observations and impressions of the school climate, I decided the school needed a new direction. Parent and central office staff complaints further informed this conclusion.

I also realized that students were beginning to feel comfortable with me and were learning to trust my motives for engagement. High school students, in particular, constantly asked to sit with me during lunch, called me, emailed me, or texted me. Often, I received requests to intervene regarding family matters or discipline issues at school. As I began to

discuss and explain the truth about the funding issue, a new level of trust and understanding emerged. It was clear that former administrators who ignored including students in decision making at the district and school levels had perpetuated the problem. In essence, students were the forgotten stakeholders. One group of forgotten stakeholders, alternative school students, unexpectedly caught my attention, which thrust me upon a perilous path.

### **The alternative school**

Shortly after my arrival, the principal of the alternative school invited me to visit. The school is primarily for students with disciplinary issues. The campus, situated in a group of portable classrooms, stood adjacent to one of the high schools. It was raining on the day of my visit as I walked past a series of portable classrooms on my way to the office, which was also a portable building. As I approached these structures, I immediately noticed that the exteriors were in very poor condition, including broken windows covered with plywood and rotten building material. I became disturbed at the thought of students being taught in such a dilapidated environment. However, the worn exteriors of the portables paled in comparison to the interiors. Inside the portables were electric cables hanging from the ceiling, water stained tiles, broken windows, and old carpets, which emitted the stench of decomposing fabric. These portables were dangerous for students and teachers and clearly not conducive to teaching and learning.

Inside the separate computer lab portable, the smell of mildew was so overpowering that my immediate instinct was to get outside. The portables were uninhabitable. I was enraged at the thought of students and staff being made to work in such deplorable and appalling conditions. Teachers taught students in small groups scattered around a communal classroom crammed with tables, chairs, desks, projectors, and other teaching equipment. I also noted the outdated study

carrels were simply inadequate, in poor condition, and unsafe. The question running through my mind was, “How can anyone teach or learn under these deplorable conditions?”

Compounding this situation was the fact that the portable classrooms did not have restrooms. Due to the students’ alternative school placement, they were not allowed to use the nearest restrooms inside the high school building. Instead, students walked outside and around the back of the high school buildings to use the farthestmost facilities.

### **Finding a solution**

I met with the principal to determine the cause of this situation. She replied that the former administration “simply did not care about me or my students.” I left the alternative school with a commitment to the school principal that I would relocate the students and staff to another location. In a superintendent’s cabinet meeting the same day, the urgency of moving the alternative school was the overriding concern. Within a week, we identified a potential site, which was at an existing middle school. Not filled to capacity, storage occupied an entire classroom wing.

As an assistant superintendent and I toured the location, there was no question in my mind that it was the ideal site for the alternative school. I instructed the assistant superintendent to begin immediate cleaning and remodeling in order to move the alternative school. I was excited that the students and staff at the alternative school would be relocated to a proper location. Because the site was not centralized, the school board requested the district provide transportation for students who needed it.

### **Resistance to change**

What I did not anticipate was resistance from the surrounding community. Halfway into the project, it became apparent that a group of parents was in disagreement with the proposed

relocation, and they wished to speak to me. I instructed the middle school principal to schedule a meeting. Initially, there were just a few concerned parents. The meeting was scheduled two days later after my initial contact with the principal.

Without my knowledge or consent, the administration of the middle school notified all parents of my intentions and invited them to the meeting. Apparently, the administration had conducted a subversive effort to prevent me from relocating the alternative school. When I arrived at the school for the meeting, there were approximately three hundred people in attendance. Parents, students, political representatives, and community members had all come to voice their objections to the move. I entered the gymnasium, introduced myself as the new superintendent, thanked and welcomed everyone, and proceeded to provide an explanation and rationale for my decision.

My presentation included pictures of the deplorable conditions at the alternative school; I thought photographic evidence would help me persuade the crowd that my actions were well justified. After all, the majority of the students in the alternative school, at least at that particular time, were from the same community. As my presentation progressed, it was evident that nothing that I said would convince anyone. The tone of the meeting took a turn for the worse. Some people yelled out derogatory remarks about the students in the alternative school (e.g. criminals). It was clear; the students were not welcome there.

Regardless of the intensity of the meeting and the evident rejection of the community, I continued to appeal to the parents that the students in the alternative school deserved a better educational environment, one that was safe and conducive to teaching and learning. I insisted that students in the alternative school did not pose a threat. Regardless of my explanation, some people demanded that these students be moved somewhere else. Realizing that the meeting

would continue without a productive outcome, I thanked everyone and called it a night. Almost instantly, a crowd of people surrounded me demanding that I change the relocation plan.

Fearing for my safety, security guards escorted me out to a classroom where a television crew was waiting for me to give an on-camera interview. At the end of the interview, I contacted the school board to inform them of the events. I went home somewhat overwhelmed by the experience but determined to reflect and learn from these events. I made the mistake of assuming that I had the support of the school administration. I did not. Nonetheless, once the classroom wing at the middle school was renovated, the alternative school was moved there.

### **Applying the principles of social capital to the alternative school experience**

If I were to have assumed a traditional superintendent's role, the faraway boss administering from a distance, I do not believe the alternative school would have been moved. After all, several of my more traditional predecessors took no action to move these students into a better educational environment. It is my understanding that the principal complained about the condition of the school with no affirmative response to resolve the problem. Perhaps these concerns languished among hundreds of others, either extinguished by apathy, indifference, and bureaucratic red tape, perceived budgetary priorities or combinations of these factors. The principal sat powerless to relocate the campus.

In terms of social capital, a better educational setting complete with improved equipment and materials for alternative students were "resources... embedded in one's network or associations, and accessible through direct or indirect ties with institutional agents" (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, 1067). As an institutional agent, I mobilized the support of the institution, used my power and authority, position, status and reputation for the benefit, and support of students (Stanton-Salazar, 2011). At the very least, my direct intervention significantly accelerated the

move, which under normal processes might have taken years from planning stages to completion, subjecting students “educated” under these deplorable conditions to additional years of suffering.

Furthermore, I believe being an agent of social capital involves a corresponding mindset. Embracing a non-traditional leadership approach to the superintendency does not only involve style, physical work location, and access; it also implies a strong advocacy for the disenfranchised. In this case, students that were cast aside due to their “behavior” were elevated to receive equitable academic opportunities through enhanced facilities, equipment and an overall environment conducive to learning. As an agent of social capital, I provided the sense of urgency and authority required to make prompt changes to better the lives of students.

At this point during the beginning of my superintendency, the words of Brown, Swenson, and Hertz (2007) rang so true, “the role of the superintendent is at once complex, difficult, and fraught with potential for failure” (p. 5). Regardless of the controversy surrounding the relocation of the alternative school, my daily school visits continued. In a district encompassing a geographical area of 380 square miles and 24 to 35 miles between the three comprehensive high schools, my schedule was arranged so that all schools in each of the three feeder patterns were visited at least once per week and high schools at least two times per week. During these visits, I learned of an array of other issues that needed to be resolved.

### **School culture, band instruments and landscaping: A multifaceted job**

My interactions with students along with related thoughts were included in my journal and/or the weekly log. I reflected on these meetings and their concerns. Meetings with students gave them the opportunity to discuss any issue, personal or school related. I reveal the breadth of

the concerns in this section. While many of these issues related to inequity, some evidenced their frustrations or lacking a voice.

Some of the student comments gave me insight into the workings of the school administration. As the students became comfortable conversing with me on a variety of school and personal matters, they also began to express stronger opinions and expectations of their teachers, administrators, and central office staff.

### **Student voices raised to change a school's culture**

On one occasion when I was meeting with high school students at lunch, a group gathered around me to ask why the school was “so boring.” According to these individuals, the environment of the school was lacking. I was astonished. It was the newest building in the district, and essentially, one of the most beautiful high schools in the region. I reminded the students of that fact. The students countered that “a building does not make a school, the people do.” Other students indicated that the principal was unapproachable and “does not care about us.” They listed a litany of complaints against this administrator. To compound the students’ dissatisfaction, the school did not have any pep rallies or “fun activities,” a situation that, according to the students, “killed the spirit of the school.”

After my meeting with the students, I directed the principal to make the necessary changes to transform the culture of the school. The campus administration worked relentlessly to change the perception of students. When a new principal took charge, I directed him to continue improvement initiatives. The students’ voices were being heard and the appropriate action taken as a result.

### **Students question the removal of a coach**

At another high school, a group of students asked me to sit with them during lunch. The students expressed their discontent with the removal of their coach. According to the students, “No one bothered to tell us what is going to happen to our program.” I informed them that I would take care of it. The same day, I instructed the assistant superintendent in charge of athletics to convene a meeting with the director of athletics, the athletic coordinator, and the principal to meet with the students. The meeting took place the following day. A few days later when I returned to the school for lunch, the students expressed appreciation “for giving us a voice.”

### **Diana and the pursuit of better band instruments**

At the same school, another group of students complained that the school did not have sufficient instruments for the band program. According to the students, the school was “borrowing” instruments from other schools outside of the district. As a result of the meeting, I requested an inventory of band instruments and an assessment of the program. I also attended a football game with the intention of seeing the band perform. The students were correct; their instruments were in bad shape. I directed the allocation of funds to buy new instruments for the students. Over \$150,000 was reallocated for the new instruments.

When the instruments arrived, Diana, a band student, thanked me. From that moment on, she was my constant visitor every time I went to the school for lunch. I learned about Diana’s background, which was somewhat similar to mine. I became her mentor, and in some ways, a father figure to her. Unfortunately, Diana moved to another school district.

Sometime later during a cross-country meet, one of the coaches at her new school recognized me as the superintendent. The coach shared that Diana “was bragging” about the

superintendent from the former district. I was somewhat confused; I did not know what he was talking about. The coach stated that Diana was applying for a scholarship and asked him for a letter of recommendation. The coach agreed and told her of the need for the second letter of recommendation. The coach asked Diana if she knew of anyone. She replied, “Yes, I’ll ask the superintendent from my former district.” The coach stated he was in total disbelief when Diana took out her cell phone and called me directly. He was even more surprised when I answered the call and spoke to the student.

Approximately a month later, I received a call from Diana to notify me she was the recipient of a four-year scholarship to a university in California. I have kept in contact with her from time to time to encourage her to “go to college and never give up.” I was moved by the student’s reply to one of my text messages: “I will never give up thanks to people like you Mr. Martinez.” As the end of the school year approached, she invited me to her graduation. I considered it an honor to attend along with my wife and children.

Students not only learned that my school visits were intended for listening, but that I actually followed up with their concerns. In order to keep up with the multiple requests and issues from students, I depended heavily on an iPhone app that helped me organize and keep track of all the students’ concerns. I constantly encouraged students to communicate with me or to approach the principal, counselors, or teachers when they had needs.

### **Student voices raised to acquire improved facilities and landscaping**

At one of the high schools, students complained that their campus with the oldest building was not at par with the other secondary level facilities. The students pointed out the lack of landscaping maintenance, the faulty sound system, and even the mascot that smelled “horrible.” They viewed their building as neglected. This conversation reflected the fact that this

district under this superintendency was now listening and making changes. Fiscal and human resources supported solutions to student-identified problems.

The chief financial officer informed me that I had the latitude to spend approximately 3 million dollars left unencumbered by the previous superintendent. With the approval of the school board at its next meeting, a series of beautification projects across the district in response to student concerns commenced. The entrance to the school was remodeled both outside and inside, grass fields were added to the elementary schools, and the middle schools were landscaped.

In addition, a community park enhanced the appearance of another middle school. It included a soccer field, a walking trail, exercise equipment, and basketball courts. This park replaced old fences and accumulations of dirt in front of the campus. During the planning process for the project, I was advised not to fund the community park or remove the fences because “of safety concerns” and “possible vandalism.” However, I continued to support the project because the potential benefits to students far outweighed any perceived negatives. Students who told me the school did “not look like a prison anymore with so many fences in front” of the school vindicated my support of the park.

The band instrument and facilities improvement stories further exemplify how an agent of social capital works within the system to better the lives of students. In this case, I mobilized the support of the institution (school district) by using my power and authority to acquire resources (band instruments and upgraded facilities) for the benefit and support of students (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

The alternative school dilemma, the band instrument problem and facility improvement challenge were internal issues that required attention. Superintendents are tasked with resolving

concerns within the district, but also have a responsibility to look beyond its borders. Boundaries can often limit student access to experiences, resources and opportunities.

### **Exposing Students to a Wider World**

Students in the district are close to an airport and freeway that lead to points all over the nation and world. However, they often do not have the means to leave their relatively isolated neighborhoods. In addition to modes of transportation, technology is a tool that can give students a richer awareness of what is outside the confines of the school system. Yet, because of lack of resources, they frequently have limited access to computers and Wi-Fi. A well-rounded education involves more than can be offered by a textbook within the four walls of a classroom. As an agent of social capital, I wanted to connect students in meaningful ways to a larger world.

#### **Ramon's story**

Ramon, a high school student asked me for assistance with his music program. He is perhaps one of the best musicians the district ever produced. Ramon performed at state level competitions every year, was a member of the El Paso Youth Symphony, and even played in New York City. This young man asked if I could help him fund a trip to a music institute in Washington. His parents did not have the financial means to assist him. Unfortunately, the school district does not sponsor private trips for students, as Ramon requested. However, I contacted several private businesses and invited the owners to lunch to request assistance.

Thankfully, they agreed and Ramon's trip for the summer institute became a reality. This story stands as an example of how an agent of social capital was able to connect an individual student to resources. When Ramon graduated, he went to study abroad at a prestigious university to focus on his music career. Ramon became the first student in the history of the district to receive a scholarship to study abroad after high school graduation. Ramon's story stands as an

example of gathering resources to help one student travel beyond the confines of the district in pursuit of his dreams. We also promoted other initiatives to give groups of students a wider view of the city, state, and nation.

### **Showing students the world beyond**

It became my practice to take students along with me to the State of the City, State of the County, State of the Military addresses and other events which only high-level officials normally attended. I aimed to show our young people that there was a world beyond the district. They learned of issues not found in their textbooks or in their relatively isolated neighborhoods. Access to the outside world and to an array of other resources also came through our Chromebook initiative.

### **Chromebook and Wi-Fi initiatives**

Although useful and important to our progress, I believe technology works to exacerbate the educational disparities between rich and poor students. Parents that are more affluent can afford to buy their children computers and pay for Wi-Fi, while the less advantaged cannot. Privileged students enjoy an academic advantage, thus widening performance gaps. To mitigate this inequity and promote educational achievement, we purchased Chromebook computers for all of our students. We also installed Wi-Fi in buses with longer routes and expanded it in and outside of school buildings. The district is now looking to connect to entire neighborhoods.

The Chromebook and State of the City, County and Military initiatives illustrate how an agent of social capital links groups of students to resources (technology and government presentations) otherwise unavailable to them. I used my power and authority, position, status and reputation for the benefit, and support of students (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

While I addressed issues within the district and found ways to expose students to the wider world, I was drawn to individual tragedies that required my attention. I was not always able to successfully intervene. However, I attempted to learn from these sad experiences to provide safety nets for students to come.

### **Gut Wrenching Issues**

While I describe some of the positive aspects of advocating for students, there are also instances where the solutions are not as simple or positive. On several occasions, I had to deal with heart-wrenching issues, such as family violence, student neglect and abuse, drug abuse, sexual abuse, and mental health problems. However, to protect the privacy of students, I will not narrate my interactions with them. In some cases, I had to intervene to protect students against their own parents.

The district made student safety a priority. To this end, we provided training for school counselors and administrators. In many cases, I was directly involved to resolve the issue or provide assistance to the family. For example, a parent who came to my office to express her fear of her son committing suicide due to “bullying in the school.” I immediately requested a visit to her home to speak with her son. Once I understood the concern directly from the victim, I immediately went to the school to visit with the principal to ensure proper support for the student and to address this problem with the other students. The student was provided with my cell phone number and the number of another staff member and was told to call immediately if he needed help. I followed up with the student and parent on a weekly basis until I felt it was no longer needed.

## **Nathan's story**

Not all interactions with students resulted in positive outcomes. I worked with Nathan for over five months to ensure he graduated from high school. He did not. Nathan dropped out of school. During multiple conversations with this student, I realized that his life story was perhaps more challenging than mine was. Nathan's mother passed away when he was a teenager and his father became a drug addict. With no one to depend on and at a very young age, Nathan was homeless, and he turned to drugs and alcohol, as he said, "to escape from this world full of crap."

Nathan received all the support at school that I believed would make a difference in his young life. He received counseling, tutoring, mentoring, extracurricular activities, and my financial support. I was happy for Nathan. He made considerable progress, reduced his dependency on drugs, and was on track for graduation. Nathan and I had many long conversations about his life and plans for the future, and he always expressed appreciation "for the opportunities you've given me, Sir." The principal, the counselor, the social worker, and I worked closely to ensure Nathan's wellbeing. However, just one month before the end of the school year, Nathan dropped out of school. Soon after, I received a call from a total stranger who informed me that Nathan was fine and working for him. Unable to track the private call, I lost track of Nathan. I began to experience an emotional paradox. I felt I had done everything I could for Nathan, yet, I failed him; I did not do enough. I hope and pray he is doing well.

## **Good comes from Nathan's story**

As a result of my interaction with Nathan, I realized that I needed to do more to help students who have a drug dependency or addiction. I realized it was not enough to provide counseling, mentoring, and other forms of support without appropriate treatment. In consultation with my administrative team, I contracted with a local substance abuse center to provide

specialized treatment for students like Nathan. Again, this is an example of how an agent of social capital uses his authority and position to connect students to support systems that normally would be inaccessible. My individual experience with Nathan ultimately generated a positive outcome for larger numbers of students.

I realized during the course of my work, such as addressing the alternative school problem, improving facilities, providing quality band instruments, and exposing students to the world outside the district, that I could not do it alone. A strong supporting cast was essential, especially principals who would not “turn the other way” when confronted with student concerns.

### **Never Turn the Other Way**

Students became accustomed to my constant presence in schools and at school functions, and more importantly, students learned to speak out and reach out for assistance. I constantly encouraged students to “speak up” and to ask “your parents to call me.” I often passed out my business cards that include my personal phone number. My conversations with students, mainly during lunch or after school activities, prompted personnel actions, including suspensions or terminations of some employees.

While I had informed all teachers and staff from the very beginning of my tenure that students will be treated with “the utmost respect and dignity,” some employees either ignored my words or had been accustomed to yelling at students, and in some cases bullying students, without repercussions. In most cases, the students were correct, as proven by the investigations that I requested. I sent a clear message to principals that any administrator “who turned the other way from protecting children was not welcome on my team.” In some cases, principals were not

able to cope with my incessant demands and expectations “to listen to students,” and by derivation their parents, and act accordingly on the students’ behalf.

As some principals left the district, I changed the procedures in the hiring process and included high school students on the interviewing committees. I directed the same for the hiring of any other administrative position at the central office. Including student representation on the interview committees became a common practice in the district. Students expressed their appreciation for “having a voice” in the decision-making process and for the opportunity to participate, as one student told me, “in a professional and formal environment. I will not forget.”

### **Getting Students to the Stage**

While not “turning the other way” is one essential ingredient to building a student-centered school system, attending to its core aims is equally imperative. We want all students to realize their potentials by graduating from high school. The following stories exemplify our efforts to this end.

#### **Marco’s challenge**

Another issue that emerged was how students were being treated in relation to their credits gained. During my school visits, one of the students, Marco, asked me for help. Specifically, he asked if the school district provided assistance for senior students who were lacking credits for graduation. As I inquired more into the matter, Marco stated that he moved to another high school that lured him with the idea of “open enrollment.” According to Marco, he returned because he was “not getting the help [he] needed” at the other district. I told him that I would look into the matter and find ways to assist.

That same afternoon, my chief academic officer visited my office to inform me that Marco was not the only student who returned. Twenty-eight students who transferred two years

earlier to a new high school in a neighboring district re-enrolled in my district. However, the students returned without the proper credits for graduation and were at risk of not graduating. The chief academic officer proposed that the majority of the Curriculum and Instruction Department personnel be temporarily reassigned to assist the students at the high school. I agreed, and these immediate efforts helped students regain missing credits. Thankfully, graduation was still more than four months away.

### **Jose and Arturo: Making it to the finish line**

As graduation time approached, the majority of the students regained their credits. Two students did not. I was informed that the two students “had given up.” My chief academic officer asked me to go to the school and speak to them, but I had a different idea. Instead, I called the transportation department and the school principal. I requested the two students come to the central office in the district’s Suburban to visit. When the students arrived, I asked the first student, Jose, to accompany me to my office, while the second student, Arturo, waited.

As I walked into my office and the student walked behind me, I instructed Jose to sit on my leather chair behind the massive mahogany superintendent’s desk. Jose was stunned. “I can’t,” he replied. In the meantime, I sat down on the chair in front of my desk. Reluctantly, Jose sat down and then smiled. “How does it feel to be the boss?” I asked. “This is nice Mister,” Jose replied as he looked around the large and elegant office. “Son, I understand you are not graduating. I am told that you have given up. Is that true? If you have given up on yourself, I have not given up on you. What do I need to do to help you complete your credits? I want to see you walk in a couple of weeks.” Jose began expressing the reasons for being behind and not having sufficient credits for graduation.

As Jose began to describe his situation, including his family life and economic conditions, I felt as if he were describing my own life. “Son, I promise to do everything I can to help you, if you promise to do everything you can to do what we ask of you.” Jose agreed. I handed him a diploma cover. “Please open it,” I said. “That is your actual diploma. If you noticed, it has your name on it, but it is not signed. Please pass it to me, let me sign it in front of you. If you finish all your work and complete your credits, the diploma is yours. In addition, the medallion hanging from the wall behind you will be a special gift for you. You are the first student to see this medallion. This will be the first year graduating seniors receive a medallion from the superintendent of schools.” I stood up and said, “Lets practice.” I picked up the medallion and placed it around Jose’s neck. We sat down and then I shared my life story with Jose. When I finished my narrative, Jose simply stated, “I’ll do whatever I need to do to graduate. Thank you, Mister for the opportunity.”

The conversation and actions with Arturo were similar to Jose’s. Except, Arturo was not facing economic challenges. When I asked him how he felt riding in “the nice Suburban”, he replied there was nothing special, “My dad owns a newer one,” he replied. Nonetheless, I still shared my background with Arturo and my experiences during my youth. Then, I closed our discussion with the following words, “If I was able to do something meaningful in life, facing the obstacles I faced, imagine the great things you can accomplish?”

Prompted by my conversations with the two students, I directed the three high school principals to expand the hours of credit recovery labs and open the labs during the weekends, if necessary, for students who did not have Internet at home. Jose did not have a computer at home, so the school loaned him a laptop to assist him with the completion of his schoolwork.

The day of graduation, instead of going to the hospitality room when I arrived at the venue, I went to congratulate each one of the graduating seniors. I was saddened that I did not see Jose or Arturo. My chief academic officer informed me that the students had been working up until the last minute the morning of the graduation, but he was not sure if the students finished or not. The graduating seniors were lining up and the principal and I were preparing for the processional when suddenly I saw Jose through a partition window. He was running towards us. When Jose reached the principal and me, he said, "I finished Mister. Thank you." He then gave me a hug. I told him I was very proud of him and to "go line up, we don't have much time." Almost comically, he stated, "I am not in a dress code (in compliance with the dress code), I did not have a chance to shave." Without hesitation and perhaps to the astonishment of the principal, I replied, "Mijo, (son) enjoy the graduation, forget about the dress code. Go line up." As the music began to play and we began to walk, Arturo also came in running. I simply signaled for him to get in line with my thumbs up.

As students received their diplomas and walked across the stage to greet dignitaries, I congratulated them and handed out medallions I had commissioned to commemorate the occasion. I was filled with emotions as many students expressed their gratitude for helping them during the course of the year. As I shook their hands, one of the students caught me by surprise as he grabbed me around my waist and lifted me up in front of the large crowd of people. Another student said: "I am not shaking your hand, I am giving you a hug. You are awesome man." I whispered in his ear, "Go and transform the world, just as you transformed your school. Then come back and tell the old man what you did." "I will," the student replied.

### **Motivating sisters: Connecting with a business mindset**

On another occasion, I attempted to motivate two sisters. These students also refused to attend the graduation ceremony. I asked them to attend “as a gift for the family, especially for mom or dad.” The students replied that their mother “did not care whether we attend or not, we don’t live with her. We live with our dad, but we don’t know if he is even our dad or not, he really doesn’t care.”

Every time I met with students to convince them to attend the graduation ceremony, I appealed to their emotions. In most cases, the students cried when I asked them to tell me about their families. In the case involving these two seniors, they showed no emotions at all. It was evident that the difficult experiences they endured growing up left them severely wounded. They maintained a façade of being strong, but in reality, they were still children who had been hurt by their family. Of course, I knew the feeling.

When I asked these two students what they wanted to accomplish after high school, both indicated they wanted to start a business. At that moment, it occurred to me that if the emotional appeal did not work, I would use a different tactic. I negotiated with them with the promise of a “special investment for their future business” if they attended the graduation ceremony. I told the students that I would make them a deal they could not refuse because “good business people learn to recognize good deals. If you are serious about being in business then you cannot refuse a deal that only benefits you. There is no benefit for me other than the satisfaction of seeing you graduate from high school.” About three days later, the principal informed me that the students were indeed going to the graduation. I prepared special notes in sealed envelopes along with my “investments” and discretely gave them to the students as they crossed the stage to receive their diplomas.

### **The fruit of these interactions**

As a result of these interactions with students, I realized I needed to do more for students who needed more than academic support. I proposed to the school board a partnership with Communities in Schools, an organization dedicated to facilitating access to community resources inside public schools. The school board agreed with my proposal and the partnership was established. The partnership included the placement of trained professionals in every school to help students and their families with nonacademic needs, social services, and financial support.

### **Leading the homeless and abandoned to the stage**

In my journal, I recorded the cases of homeless or abandoned children. In one particular instance, a student was transported to the hospital and when the family was contacted, the principal was informed that there was no one available to go to the hospital. I authorized the assistant principal to go be with the student and stay in the hospital with him. After the student was released approximately three hours later, the family was contacted again. The response was that “there was no one available to pick him up.” The principal followed up and kept me informed of his situation until he returned to school. Thankfully the student recovered and continued in school until his graduation.

In these cases involving helping students graduate, I mobilized the support of the institution (school district) by using my power and authority to acquire resources (expanded credit recovery hours, business investment money for the sisters, partnership with Communities in Schools) for the benefit (receiving a high school diploma) and support of students (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

It saddens me deeply when students’ fail to receive their diplomas. Thus, we endeavor to provide as many support systems as possible to help them succeed. However, to put life into

some perspective, there are worse events that occur during the tenure of a superintendent.

Students, faculty and staff who leave this world too soon serve as the best examples. I consider these occurrences ultimate tragedies.

### **The Ultimate Tragedy**

My first year was also marked by tragedy. A school district must deal with the good and the bad, including the loss of personnel and students. While I dealt with tragedies before as director and chief of human resources, I did not really know the individuals involved. I was only a distant bureaucrat at the central office. As a superintendent who was directly involved in the educational and in many cases personal, lives of students, my reaction was very different. This section captures some heartbreaking moments in my tenure. It also addresses how I responded in the best interests of students.

#### **Martin**

Painfully, soon after graduations, two unrelated events took the lives of two students. These individuals attended separate high schools. I met the young people under very different circumstances through my school visits. I met Martin, one of the students at the alternative school. Over many conversations with him throughout his senior year, I learned a great deal about his family life and the multiple economic and social challenges it faced. Martin was a young man who endured much adversity, but was always happy, full of life, and constantly had a smile on his face. While Martin often protested about school regulations, he was always polite and respectful. The school principal and I worked closely to help him graduate. Martin successfully passed all “End of Course” state exams and completed all the credits for graduation. However, tragically, Martin left this world too soon.

## **Christopher**

The other individual, Christopher, was a scholar, a top-ten student, a role model, and was well mannered. If he were able to know, I believe Christopher would most appreciate that I described him as a loving and caring Christian. Christopher's faith in God was central to who he was. I sensed he knew exactly what he wanted to accomplish after high school graduation. Christopher's intellectual conversations with me were most interesting. I had no doubt that he was destined to achieve great things in life. Unfortunately, a senseless accident shortly after graduation dashed his lofty dreams.

## **Another student passes away**

I never imagined that my first year as superintendent would begin and end with profound sorrow and grief. A few months after my appointment, a student was tragically killed in a car accident and a sibling critically injured. I was in disbelief at the sad news of the student's death. I attended a memorial in the student's honor, where I had the opportunity to speak to a large gathering of grieving students. While I tried my best to restrain my emotions, the intense sadness and sorrow clearly visible on students' faces prevented me from controlling my own internal struggle. I did my best through my words to bring comfort and hope to the students, but I knew they were not enough. Professional counseling and support were provided to all the students to help them cope with the tragedy of losing their classmate and friend.

The unexpected deaths of these students left me with a profound sense of loss. I grappled with the question of human suffering and death, just as I had when members of my own family passed away. I reflected once again on my role as superintendent and for the first time questioned my direct connection with students. Should I distance myself from students? Should I focus on leading and managing the school district from afar? Should I cease regular engagement

with students? Perhaps, situations like the tragic passing of three young people would be less painful, I reasoned.

### **Consoling a grieving school community**

Soon after the start of my second year as Superintendent, an elementary teacher passed away. I learned of her death close to the end of the school day. I rushed to the school along with a group of counselors to inform the students, as I did not want them to find out through the news media that evening. When I arrived at the school, the principal, faculty, and staff were overwhelmed with emotions, paralyzed by the devastating news.

In view of the situation at hand, I took over all decision-making, including announcing the death of the beloved teacher to the students. I instructed office personnel to call all the students' parents to pick up their children. Students were not allowed to leave the classroom unless a parent or family member was present. I met with every parent or family member as they came to school to apprise them of the situation and to offer ways to support their children as they coped with the loss of their teacher. In addition, the family was offered the professional services and support of the counseling department. When I left the school, a parent handed me a poem her daughter had written to the teacher just a few days before her passing. I kept the poem under the glass of my desk for the entire year and read it periodically.

As stated at the beginning of the chapter, a superintendent's day is filled with unpredictability. It is also characterized by extremely low points, such as discussed in this section, and significant high points. I believe that positives certainly help to keep you afloat and provide encouragement to keep moving forward. Learning that the community now looked favorably upon the relocation of the alternative school was an example of being lifted up and inspired to do more.

## **From Backlash to Acceptance**

Within a year and a half of the relocation of the alternative school and the community backlash, several projects were completed, including the community park, walking trails, and grass fields at the elementary and middle schools. Other projects were also under contract, such as removing and replacing the old floors at two high schools and the placement of landscaping in front of these campuses. I began to hear compliments from parents and words of appreciation for “what you are doing for our schools.”

I continued to be interested in the public’s view of the alternative school relocation. I knew there was substantial opposition to the move, but did parent perceptions change over time? I consistently visited with parents, mainly during school dismissal at the elementary and middle schools, with the purpose of soliciting feedback about the new projects and the alternative school. Based on my visits with parents, it became evident that the alternative school was no longer an issue. On the contrary, some parents told me they were part of the “crowd” opposing the relocation of the school. “But now we see, it is not a problem at all. Most students don’t even know the alternative school is located in the building.”

As a new school year approached, I was again determined to continue engaging students in an effort to hear their opinions, concerns, questions, complaints, and periodically their cries for help. I realized that during my first year on the job, students’ voices inspired me to find meaning and value in my role as superintendent. The commitment to students emboldened me to relocate the alternative school despite intense community and political opposition. The remodeled alternative school included interactive boards in every classroom, a computer lab, a teachers’ workroom, private restrooms, security cameras, a conference room, a counselor’s suite, a principal’s office, new furniture and professionally installed study carrels for students.

After several months in operation, the predictions of doom and gloom for the middle school where the alternative school was placed never came true. On the contrary, the alternative school, with its emphasis on academics, became a place of meaningful learning where students felt welcomed, appreciated and respected. Ironically, at least four students asked me not to release them to their regular schools because they felt the structure and environment of this alternative setting helped them to “concentrate” and “focus on school.” At the request of parents and with the consent of the students themselves, at least two individuals remained at the alternative school where they have found success in making up school credits.

My weekly routine included visiting students at the alternative school, where I met individually with students in the conference room. These spontaneous conversations often afforded me the opportunity to understand and make sense of the reasons students were placed there in the first place. I was also able to assess the district’s discipline procedures and treatment of students in the process of their placement. Regardless of the reasons for the alternative school placement, I never judged the students. I tried to understand them instead. The conversations served to guide, mentor and counsel students, while I still maintained my professional role as a superintendent. When a graduating senior, who was asked to write about the person who inspired him the most, indicated “the superintendent”, I was extremely moved. In part, the student stated, “even if I messed up and went to the alternative school, the superintendent still said I believe in you.” The student graduated and is now attending college.

While I was visiting one of the high schools early in the morning, a student who transferred from a neighboring district became disruptive. The student would not follow instructions from the monitors or the teachers. The school administration intervened and placed the student in school suspension. I requested to meet with the student alone. At first, the student

refused to say much and continued being defiant. I called the student's mother to inform her of the student's behavior.

Based on my conversation, the student's mother had reached a point of almost "giving up." The mother's poor economic standing, divorced status, and multiple jobs "to make ends meet" restricted her ability to offer any assistance. The student's mother scolded him over the phone but to no avail. The student continued his refusal to speak. I informed the young man that I would be back to see him at the end of the school day.

Thirty minutes before dismissal, I arrived back at the school to see the student again. The student agreed to speak to me, but only to tell me that he was going to the alternative school. The student was unwilling to say anything else. To the student's surprise, I visited the alternative school week after week. He was no longer defiant, and we conversed many times about his behavior, his economic situation at home, and his future after high school graduation. This individual was stunned when I shared my life story and explained how much it resembled his own. When the student was released from the alternative school, I followed up at the high school. About a month after the student's release from the alternative school, I received a text:

Student: Thank you, Mr. Martinez, and yes, I'm trying everything so that I can behave and pass all my classes and not go to the alternative school again.

My reply: Great...I know you'll be at your school until graduation. You do not belong at the alternative school...I am very, very proud of you!

Student: Thank you, Mr. Martinez. I am also excited I got out of the alternative school. Thank you for everything you have done for me.

### **Something to Cheer About: The Bond Issue Passes**

A year of planning, preparation and hard work to regain the community's trust finally began to pay off. A few months into my second year as superintendent, the board of trustees approved a measure to place an eighty-million-dollar bond before the voting public. My conjecture was that the bond would be a referendum on my own job performance and on my ability to regain the trust of the community, and more importantly the trust of students. During the planning process, I spoke on behalf of student recommended projects. Salient among the projects was the construction of a medical academy at one of the high schools. The idea originated during my conversation with students at a middle school who expressed concerns that the district did not have a medical academy "as the larger districts do." Students expressed that "only the affluent few leave to medical magnet schools, while we cannot afford it."

Similarly, students at two of the older high school buildings expressed their dissatisfaction with the adequacy of the high school cafeterias, athletic facilities, and career and technology program buildings. I was pleased that, in addition to projects recommended by a facilities assessment committee, all the items suggested by students were part of the bond package. For more than six months, I spent long hours visiting with parents, students, and community organizations, and on weekends visited houses of worship to provide information about the proposed bond projects.

On Election Day, May 9, 2015, I was extremely nervous, not knowing how the community would vote. I was concerned that the pending litigation against the district in the Texas Supreme Court would decrease the chances of the bond passing. As the news media began to report the early voting results, it became increasingly evident that the bond would pass (Wise, 2015). In the end, the voters approved the bond by a wide margin. With approximately 75%

approval, the bond received the highest voter approval rate compared to any other proposals during that election season in the city or the county, and the highest voter approval rate in the history of the district's bond elections.

The passage of the bond, I felt, affirmed my approach and decision making as superintendent. In addition to all other responsibilities, I continued to see my role as an agent of social capital for all students and continued to position myself in direct contact with and in the network of students. In this case, I heard student voices calling for improved high school cafeterias, athletic facilities, and career and technology program buildings and the addition of a medical magnet school. I used my position and authority to have these projects incorporated into the bond issue.

Approximately a year after the successful passage of the bond, the Texas Supreme Court reversed and dismissed the lawsuit in favor of the school district. While the decision was a significant reason to celebrate, I was more interested in continuing to demonstrate to my students and the community in general that I was committed to providing equitable funding for all my schools. I also urged parents and community members to join me in the development of the district's budget.

Positive feedback on the alternative school relocation, the passage of the bond issue and news that we finally prevailed in the equity lawsuit lifted my spirits and provided affirmation that we were pursuing the right course; we were embarking upon a journey to enhance the lives of the underprivileged. However, there was so much more to do in terms of elevating our district to the next level of excellence. Under a previous heading in this chapter, I described ways we encouraged high school graduation. It was now time to concentrate on college attendance.

## **Bound For Success: Promoting College Attendance**

As the year progressed, I continued visiting with students. Having lunch with students was now part of my daily routine. My school visits and interactions with students had become a matter of standard course. I continued making decisions mindful of the conversations and meetings I was having with students. Some of the programs implemented in the school district found their genesis in the interactions between the students and the superintendent, including initiatives that promoted college attendance.

### **Partnership with the University of Texas at El Paso**

One salient example was the implementation of a partnership with a local university. Because of my conversations with students, I realized that students who were determined to pursue higher education were still lacking the proper understanding of the college enrollment process, counseling, and college life. In response, I visited with officials at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) and proposed a partnership called Bound for Success. They enthusiastically endorsed my proposal.

Through the partnership, the top 25% percent of the seniors at each high school participated in a variety of activities in conjunction with the university. Students visited the college of their interest and attended athletic events at no cost; and most importantly, students in the program completed the university enrollment process as high school seniors. Students were advised by university counselors and earned scholarship opportunities. In addition, students were eligible to apply for financial assistance to enroll in the summer semester immediately after graduation without having to wait until the fall semester. Because of this partnership, the number of students who applied to UTEP from the school district increased by 27.6% and the number of students admitted and enrolled increased by 44.4% and 38.8% respectively.

### **Career and technology certification initiative**

The conversations with some students, however, reflected the reality that not all students planned to attend college after high school. As I heard them speak, I became increasingly worried that students who did not plan to go to college would end up just like me when I graduated from high school—without any skills or certification and working at the factory and a fast food restaurant. My mantra constantly played over in my mind, “my past is not their future, do something.”

These conversations led me to analyze the district’s programs relative to career and technology certifications and job skills. A review of student data indicated that there was little emphasis in career certifications for students. Only forty-three certifications were awarded to students my first year as superintendent. A plan was developed, implemented, and monitored in an effort to increase the number of certifications. At the end of one and a half years of implementation, the number of certifications increased to 462, a 1000% increase. By the end of my third year as superintendent, the number of certifications increased to more than 750.

### **Paid internship for college bound students**

In addition, I implemented a program at the central office to provide paid internship opportunities for students. Students who were interested were required to follow similar application and hiring procedures as regular employment applicants, including the interview process. Twelve of the hired senior students worked in the technology department of the school district, while others reported to the public relations division. Furthermore, some students in the program who graduated the previous year remained employed with the condition of enrollment at an institution of higher education.

## **Pomp and circumstance: Enhanced graduation ceremonies**

Each year, schools hold their annual graduation ceremonies. Students had commented on the ceremonies and the prestige of the event. Frequently, I heard stories of students who saw graduation as a huge milestone for themselves and for their family. One of the students in the Bound for Success program, Rocio, a senior at one of the high schools, requested to speak to me. Rocio stated that she attended the graduation of high school from another district in the summer and wanted to know if her ceremony was “going to be as nice as theirs.” I simply replied, “I promise it will be even better, you’ll see.”

As the new school year progressed, I had several planning meetings with principals, students, and my cabinet. The graduation site was changed to a much larger venue and the ceremony was transformed by incorporating elements of a university academic graduation, such as the macebearer and gonfalons of the district and the high schools. I instructed the planning team to pay close attention to all the details, including decorations, flowers, video projection, platform background, music, and the order of the ceremony. “Thank you, Mr. Martinez. Our graduation was awesome!!” Rocio stated at the end of the graduation ceremony. “I told you I would not forget what you told me last year. I am glad you liked it, but tell me, how did it compare to the other high school?” I asked. Rocio replied, “No comparison, ours was beautiful, it was wonderful. Thank you, thank you!”

Rocio is in her second year of attending an out-of-state university studying biology. She has communicated with me on several occasions and fondly remembers how “one of my silly comments changed the graduation ceremonies for the entire district.” By the end of my second year as superintendent, every student was required to attend commencement. Cap and gown expenses were covered by the school district for students who could not afford these items. I

wanted the students to experience the excitement of a magnificent graduation ceremony, and perhaps they would want to repeat the experience again by graduating from college.

A number of new initiatives have worked to change graduation rates. The district's graduation rate surpassed 90% for the first time ever and was higher than the state and the regional averages. Two of the high schools achieved a 100% graduation rate during the same period. However, I was not satisfied with the idea of just graduating students; I wanted to recognize this achievement that the students themselves believed signified an important milestone in their lives.

### **Send off to college gala**

Conversations with students also led to the creation of the Send Off to College Gala. Graduating seniors from all the four high schools in the district are invited to attend the end-of-year gala. Entrance to the event is free of charge, but the student must present a verification letter of acceptance to a college or university to the counselors before receiving an invitation.

Attendance at the gala steadily increased each year. The first year about 300 students attended. By the third year, close to 600 students attended from a class of 750 seniors. The gala also became an opportunity for high school principals to “brag” about their graduating seniors and highlight the scholarship money awarded to students, which increased from approximately 10 million dollars my first year to over 31 million by the end of my fourth year as superintendent.

I was excited that college attendance immediately after high school graduation, previously at about 50%, increased to more than 60%. During the gala, students are also asked to provide contact information that would be used to follow up on their stories. As a result of more than three hundred contacts with former students, I have provided letters of recommendation,

internships at the central office, community service hours, observation hours in the classroom, employment as substitute teachers, and in some cases, financial support.

In relation to serving as an agent of social capital, in order to increase college attendance, I mobilized the support of the institution (school district) by using my power and authority to acquire resources and forms of social support (partnership with UTEP, paid internships for college bound students, Send Off Gala and enhanced graduation ceremonies) for the benefit and support (college attendance and the resulting fruits of a university degree) of students (Stanton-Salazar, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

As I reached the end of my journey narrating some of my intimate, personal, and professional lived experiences, I realized the value of autoethnography as a powerful, evocative tool for self-reflection and self-examination in my attempt to illuminate my role as a superintendent of schools. My autoethnography was as Ellis (2006) puts it, a journey, not a destination. My journey, as illustrated in this autoethnography, however, is circumscribed by the limitations of space. I selected only a small portion of my interactions with students and only a few of the acts of my advocacy on their behalf.

Because my experience was so positive when I joined the church, as a superintendent, I decided to visit churches within school district boundaries during the weekends to encourage both the clergy and church members to become a source of social capital for young people in their congregations. During my church visits, the pastor or the priest allowed me to speak to the congregation from the pulpit either to make a short announcement or to be “the speaker of the hour.” I took these opportunities to share my own life story and encourage the young people to commit to graduating from high school and attend college.

Soon after a church visit, a parent called me. She sounded extremely distraught; she was in tears, almost unable to speak. She explained that her son, a senior in high school, became very depressed after her husband abandoned the family “to marry a younger woman.” “My son gave up on life, I am afraid for him. He has been receiving counseling for a long time, but nothing seems to work. He does not want to go to school or church anymore. My son was very close to his dad. It’s been very hard for him to accept that his dad abandoned us. I heard you in church and I wrote down your cell phone number when you gave it to the congregation. I’m sorry to call you, but I don’t know what to do anymore.”

The following Monday I attempted to visit the young man at school, but he was not there. I followed up the next day. Mom was correct; her son Mario was still grieving the abandonment of his father. As a result, schoolwork became unimportant and irrelevant. “I don’t care anymore, mister,” he said. Of course, I knew exactly how he felt. I shared my own struggles with Mario concerning the absence of my father. Mario simply listened without saying a word. Mario and I talked for a long time about his situation. Academically, Mario felt that he was too far behind on his credits and “it would be impossible to catch up.” I called an assistant principal to review Mario’s credits with me. I was pleased that Mario passed all the state exams, but he lacked a substantial number of school hours due to his excessive absences. Thankfully there was sufficient time left in the semester to catch up.

By my giving him a sense of hope for graduation, Mario agreed to do what I asked of him. The counselor and the assistant principal assigned him tasks after school, such as attending credit recovery lab or tutorial classes. I assigned him responsibilities for the weekend, such as community service hours at a nearby animal shelter, and volunteering at the community library sponsored by the school district. I followed up with Mario every Friday and Monday until the

last day of school. Mario was able to make up all the required hours, graduated from high school, and enrolled at community college.

As stated in the literature review, the role of the superintendent continues to evolve in complexity and difficulty, becoming more extensive and demanding (Brown et al., 2007; Kowalski, 2005a) and is “fraught with potential for failure” (Brown et al., 2007, p. 5). However, as I wrote my autoethnography and reflected on each story, I felt reinvigorated and inspired by my belief that my role as an agent of social capital for students, particularly for students who need it most, must continue. Ironically, as I was writing my final thoughts for this chapter, I received a text message from Amanda, a recent graduate from one of my high schools. Amanda informed me that two weeks had passed since she graduated and communicated with school personnel that her transcripts and test scores had not sent to her college. As a result, she was not able to register. I took immediate action to resolve her concern and to determine why school personnel failed to assist Amanda.

Amanda’s communication with me validated my rationale for providing all graduating seniors with my personal phone number, and, as I explained during my meeting with them before graduation, to call me if they needed my assistance. They do not have to feel alone. They should have someone to talk to when they need help.

### **Concern with Better Living**

I hope that by sharing my lived experiences, my autoethnography can contribute to the knowledge base within educational research, particularly the understanding of the role of the school superintendent as an agent of social capital. The reader may discover that my autoethnography may not be consistent with the more traditional academic and scientific approaches to research. However, as Bochner (2012) stated, “My concern is not with better

science but with better living and thus I am not so much aiming for some goal called ‘Truth’ as for an enlarged capacity to deal with life’s challenges and contingencies” (p. 161). As Graham (1989) observes, “the untruth of fiction may be more powerful and more significant than truth” (p. 101). As Holt (2003) explains, “qualitative researchers need to be storytellers, and storytelling should be one of their distinguishing attributes” (p. 20). “With this in mind, “I produced a manuscript in which I attempted to tell a story, rather than produce a heavily theoretical and reflective piece” (Holt, 2003, p. 20).

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Findings & Reflection

*“The resulting analysis [of autoethnography] recursively draws upon our personal experiences and perceptions to inform our broader social understandings and upon our broader social understandings to enrich our self-understandings”*  
(Anderson, 2010, p. 18).

### Introduction

This study was a form of dual diagnosis as I attempted to reshape my role as superintendent of schools while endeavoring to transform an entire organization. My experiences growing up in Mexico with my grandmother, immigrating to the United States, struggling to learn the language and just fitting in shaped my views of and my interactions with students as a superintendent. Being in a position to elicit change to better serve students, schools, and the community has made it important to revisit my experiences and to recall the struggles that students face. My formative years mirror the life stories of many of our students.

The questions guiding my study explored my practices, beliefs, and complexities as I endeavored to become an agent of social capital for students, in particular for minority students of low socioeconomic backgrounds and at-risk of not graduating from high school. The overarching questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. What experiences have influenced my role as a superintendent who views himself as an agent of social capital for all students in general and low-socioeconomic, minority students in particular?
2. What are the key practices, beliefs, and complexities for me as a superintendent striving to become an agent of social capital for students?
3. What insights can other superintendents gain from this study?

Answers to the three research questions that guided this study are within discussions of emerging themes, which follow, and in final sections of this chapter. For instance, in reference to

the first research question concerning influential experiences affecting my approach, within the discussion of the service theme as discussed later in this chapter, I recalled how my grandmother instilled a sense of altruism and explained how this lesson inspired my approach to the superintendency. Within the exploring the family dynamic theme, also discussed later in this chapter, I contemplated how the absence of my own father influenced my advocacy for students in similar situations. In addition to these examples, after a discussion of each theme in this chapter, an explanation of how it relates to research questions will follow.

In terms of the second research question regarding the practices, beliefs, and complexities associated with my journey, I discuss the complexity of navigating my role as an agent of social capital when faced by individuals and groups that did not agree with certain actions. In terms of practice, within the creating a culture of change theme, I explain how I was able to join the network of students over time, departing from the traditional practice of leading from an office to leading from school hallways, cafeterias, and classrooms. Regarding beliefs, for instance, I clearly state my position on student retention in several sections of this chapter.

In response to the final question, an entire section is devoted to implications and recommendations for practice. Before pursuing a similar course of leadership in districts with students from minority and low-socioeconomic backgrounds, superintendents and other administrators should interrogate policy to determine adverse effects on these populations, deploy proactive approaches to reach students and prepare for additional job demands.

There are numerous other examples of how this chapter is responsive to the three research questions, which should become readily apparent as one reads the following sections. Again, key findings presented at the end of each theme discussion with an explanation of how these findings relate to specific research questions should provide further clarity.

By conducting this autoethnography, I gained a better understanding of myself, and my role, “in deeper ways” (Muncey, 2010, p. 12). At the same time, this study provided an avenue for doing something meaningful and led to a broader understanding of my role as superintendent. For approximately four years, as part of my role, I carefully documented my various initiatives and interactions with students, the public, and administrators. I also collected data through traditional ethnographical methods, such as observation, field notes, documents, a journal, participation, self-observation and other artifacts. This highly personal journey took place from the beginning of my appointment as superintendent of schools. Simultaneously, I enrolled at The University of Texas at El Paso in the doctoral program. Fulfilling my roles as a professional employee, a graduate student, and a family man was without a doubt a rigorous balancing act.

### **Revisiting the Problem**

The position of superintendent appears to have evolved into a distant and almost invisible figure removed from the daily realities and challenges encountered by students. Superintendents generally spend only a pittance of time communicating with students (Fullan et al., 1991). Agents of social capital depart from this detached approach to the position. Looking back at my appointment as superintendent, perhaps I would have conformed to the traditional roles if it were not for my background and experience. I do not presume, however, that to be or become an agent of social capital, the same or similar experiences are necessary. This study documented my role from one singular perspective. My experience suggests that the superintendency does not have to conform to the traditional roles. Rather, it can evolve to include the role of an institutional agent of social capital for students.

In the next sections, I discuss themes and highlight findings that emerged from my study. Results responsive to the three research questions are also included. In general, superintendents

interested in transforming their roles, one that is perceived by students not as the distant figure appearing only during special occasions in schools, but rather as the constant source of social capital for them, may learn from this study, regardless of their own personal backgrounds and experiences.

### **Salient Themes**

Discussed in this section are the themes that emerged as I wrote my reflections of the multiple events that helped shape my understanding of my role as the superintendent. Through my analyses using the qualitative data software MAXQDA12, I identified the following themes in answering my research questions. These themes are: (a) creating a culture of change; (b) my role as an institutional agent; (c) stewardship; (d) service; (e) supporting change; (f) resistance to change; (g) changing and rewriting policy; (h) retention of students; (e) addressing the needs of low socioeconomic status and minority students; (j) exploring the family dynamic; (k) understanding the financial burden of students; and (l) self-reflection.

#### **Creating a culture of change**

In this section, I address aspects of changing the organizational culture of the district while simultaneously attempting to shape school level cultures. I subscribed to the belief that students are the district's immediate stakeholders and they can tell us about their views and needs. As Schlechty (1997) stated, "they should be the immediate focus of all school activity" (p. 68) and that is what I tried to accomplish from day one of my superintendency.

This culture of change is associated with my role as an agent of social capital. I willingly positioned myself in the network of students in an attempt to increase, as posited by Bourdieu (1986), the size and volume of social capital for them. I become an institutional agent of social capital only when I began to use my positional authority as superintendent to benefit and support

students. More importantly, I assumed this role when I situated myself in their social network, acted on their behalf, communicated directly with them, and collaborated with them to make beneficial decisions. Issues addressed with students included social, emotional, academic, financial, and family matters.

The idea that teachers and parents, but more importantly students, view superintendents only as the boss, but do not know what they do (Rose, 2011) was repugnant to me. With the intention of helping students, I became part of their network in order to understand our “common values and beliefs, and shared experiences” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 275). I purposely decided to connect with students in their social settings at school to develop meaningful relationships where they saw me as another source of information, guidance, and support. My goal was to create an environment where all students felt comfortable and empowered to seek out the help of institutional agents, including me, for assistance, information, guidance, and emotional and academic support.

I realized that I had to start somewhere. Originally, I undertook to talk to the students who were in the office of the schools I visited. Then I began to speak to students in halls and classrooms and eventually in lunchrooms, where I would sit and eat with them, learning about their experiences through their eyes. Then I began to schedule appointments with students in schools to address their questions and concerns or to follow up with requests from parents, teachers, and administrators. I adopted a fist bump as the most common form of greeting students. As time passed, the fist bump became the most distinctive characteristic of my greeting with students. In multiple cases, I was able to identify new students to the district who did not know me and were not accustomed to this form of greeting.

An analysis of my weekly activities and reports to the school board showed a consistent pattern of weekly school visits (Weekly school board logs from 2013 through 2016). My sources of data, along with the report of weekly activities, revealed that I purposely and methodically used school visits to create a culture in the school district where students felt comfortable approaching me and speaking directly on any issue.

### **Reaching out to students**

In Chapter Four, I described the practice of eating lunch with students on a daily basis and thereby establishing direct communication. However, while the vast majority of the students were similar to me in terms of ethnic origin and background, including being low socioeconomic, at-risk, migrant, second language learners and coming from broken homes, I found that they did not automatically reach out to me. This finding was particularly apparent at middle and high school levels. I had to take the first step to interact, commence conversations, relate, be visible, and engage with them in order to establish the environment and culture I was attempting to build.

### **Engaging school administrators**

I viewed my role more than an isolated managerial or ceremonial position. Rather, I aimed at serving as an example to the teachers, administrators, and other school personnel in terms of what an agent of social capital does to improve the lives of students. To this end, I wanted the staff to witness my interactions with students, following up with their concerns, and helping them solve school or family related matters. My intention was to build capacity and to ignite synergy so that a wider network of adults could intervene in the lives of students for the better. I believe my consistent actions sent a strong message to the staff regarding the power and importance of being agents of social capital. Administrators began to expand their view of their

own roles as well and embraced the concept of social capital by helping students with other needs beyond academic concerns.

I also wanted to demonstrate that the superintendent did not have to be an aloof, distant administrator pronouncing official doctrine from afar, as members of our district family were accustomed to in the past. However, during this process, I never lost sight of the fact that I had to attend to the more traditional functions of the job, such as prudent fiscal management, efficient deployment of human resources and sound instructional leadership. I could, and did, do both.

A critical observer of my superintendency may reasonably inquire: “With him out talking to students much of the day, are the important things being accomplished?” My answer to this question is a confident “Yes.” The proof resides in the numbers. Our graduation percentages have increased during my tenure and dropout rates have steadily declined. Test scores, particularly at the secondary level, have increased along with college attendance numbers. The district has received clean external annual audit reports. Bond projects continue to develop and improve schools across the district. The Board of Trustees has given me votes of confidence every year by renewing my contract and as indicated by good performance evaluations.

I believe these facts provide evidence that the district continues to move forward in very positive directions. If anything, I believe our efforts to build social capital have only complemented and enhanced the more traditional initiatives, strategies, and functions that work to improve student performance.

Unfortunately, these changes were slow. Not everyone subscribed to my ideas of social capital or to my expectations of treating our students, and by derivation parents, as we would like to be treated. I began to see the change. I was seeking more of a journey, not a destination.

Slowly, I began to recruit critical thinkers who could share a vision of social change and who were willing to support our students by becoming agents of social capital themselves.

### **Vital first steps**

The impact of my actions was evident. As students communicated more and more with me, school and central office personnel also began to take their own actions on behalf of students. In some cases, members of the superintendent's cabinet and principals sponsored students financially. Additionally, these administrators became mentors, provided school supplies for the neediest students, and more importantly, took the initiative to seek out students with the intention of helping them with school or personal matters. They were taking vital steps towards becoming agents of social capital.

There are several key findings within this theme. I found that students do not automatically respond to the agent's efforts to hear their voices. I had to earn their trust and engagement over time. I also discovered that the staff was slow to embrace this concept, but did begin to adopt practices consistent with this approach as I modeled desired behaviors. Finally, I had to be well rounded. All the district functions demanded attention and leadership.

These findings are particularly responsive to Research Question 2, which is, "What are the key practices, beliefs, and complexities for me as a superintendent striving to become an agent of social capital for students?" My practice was to engage with students in an effort to involve them in critical conversations with the aim of helping them. My belief was this initiative would give students an important voice in the decision-making process. This effort was not easy or simple, as students did not immediately respond. Rather, it involved a complex process of slowly earning trust while mitigating the concerns of skeptical staff members.

I believed it was also important to lead in all functional areas of the district, such as finance, personnel, and operations. Therefore, my practice was to lead all divisions of the system while maintaining my presence in schools. Managing multiple priorities without the complete and immediate acceptance of your leadership approach by your supporting cast is a complex process.

This section also informs Research Question 3, which is, what insights can other superintendents gain from this study? While most of the students in this study were similar to me in terms of ethnic origin and background, they did not immediately reach out. Engagement was a slow process. School leaders with an interest in pursuing this path should understand that it does not happen overnight. While commonalities between the agent and students could potentially foster communication, they do not engender immediate trust. In addition, administrators interested in being an agent of social capital should recognize that the superintendent's title and authority do not automatically create support. Role modeling, training and selective recruitment of like-minded leaders build capacity over time.

### **My role as an institutional agent**

The concept of institutional agents is of paramount importance to this study. Of all my duties as superintendent, all of which were imperative for the effective and efficient operation of the school district, this role was the most important to me. I never planned to be an agent of social capital when I first applied and later became a superintendent. In fact, I was not familiar with the concept or the theory behind it. My transformation began soon after I assumed the office. Fueled by vivid memories of those who lifted me up during my life, I felt an increasingly strong sense of personal and moral obligation to intervene in students' lives. Equally important was the realization of how far I had come and achieved in my life, and that I could use my

position as a tool to help students succeed as well. I also realized that in the process, I was honoring my past, celebrating my present, embracing the prospect of better lives for my students and setting the foundation for the transformation of a school district's culture.

As an institutional agent, I acted as a resource, advisor, advocate, and bridging agent. For example, I intervened when two students informed me they were going to in-school suspension for thirty days for "just throwing an apple" in the cafeteria during lunch. While this was serious and could potentially initiate a food fight, it was best to help students understand the consequences of their behavior rather than focusing on the punishment. On another occasions, students expressed their interest in attending the academies or academic programs of the district; I facilitated the process for them by connecting them with the appropriate administrator or counselor in charge of the program. Furthermore, I met with students for a variety of purposes and discussed an array of topics. These included academics, high school credits, discipline, school rules and requirements, drugs, college, family matters, complaints regarding school personnel and many other subjects. At the same time, I was learning where the gaps were in the school system that prevented us from helping our students achieve, as the mission of the school district states, "achieve their full potential."

However, consistent with Carolan-Sylva and Reyes (2013), I found that students who needed the most help from school personnel were often the most reluctant to speak and solicit assistance. Some students felt it was a burden to call me, to email me, and to ask for support. I deliberately worked to change their perceptions of my position and me. I worked hard to break down any communication barriers. I found that in many cases, the students embraced the attitudes of their parents when they addressed me. During my interactions with underprivileged parents, I had to assure them that they did not bother me when they called or visited. I usually

stated; “You are not interrupting my work, you are my work” when they apologized for disrupting me.

### **Breaking down barriers**

My tenure as superintendent has been a story of change; change in the life of students that I worked with, change in the way others in the school district perceived their roles and change in my view of the superintendency.

Major findings in this theme included my observation that students with the greatest needs were often the most reluctant to engage. Furthermore, they tended to embrace the belief of their parents that the superintendent was “too important to be bothered with their concerns.” I also found that gaps in the school system prevented students from achieving to their fullest potential.

These findings are especially relevant to Research Question 2, which is, “What are the key practices, beliefs, and complexities for me as a superintendent striving to become an agent of social capital for students?” The process of engaging and helping students can be complex because those with the greatest needs are often the most difficult to reach. Compounding this challenge is the observation that students and parents have the mindset that they are “bothering the superintendent with their concerns.” My practice was to take measures to break down barriers in communication, both at the district and student levels.

This discussion also addresses Research Question Three, which inquires about how other administrators can use my experience in understanding students from minority and low-income backgrounds. School leaders must not assume that students and parents from these backgrounds will automatically engage in conversations to convey their needs. Administrators must take steps to earn their trust over time by removing obstacles to communication. Creating a comfort zone is

imperative, which was the purpose of my statement to parents that they did not interrupt me. You must bring them into a circle of trust by your words and deeds.

### **Stewardship**

A superintendent wishing to become an agent of social capital should pay close attention to the concept of stewardship. Stewardship involves a person who acts as a surrogate to others. While it is associated with financial affairs, in this instance, it refers to the responsible oversight and protection of something considered worth caring for and preserving. Entrusted to me were the properties, resources, and investments of the district, but more importantly, I was responsible for the education and welfare of the district's children. I considered it a blessing, privilege, and an opportunity to help students. After all, my blessings included time, abilities, and possessions and I felt a great sense of responsibility to give back.

As a superintendent, I did not personally own any tangible district property and yet I felt a sense of ownership without any legal rights or title deeds. In this case, my sense of "ownership" did not imply "a permanent state of possession" (Jones, 2001, p. 33), rather, I "owned" only the proper stewardship of the district's property, resources, and assets that were entrusted to me. Similarly, students were not my biological children, yet I referred to them as "my kids" or "my students." I often spoke, and continue to speak, of them in the same way I speak of my own children.

Stewardship in my study means that any issue that students brought forth to me was my issue. I owned it. I had to act because I knew the impact it had on the educational experience of students and, possibly, their future after high school graduation. I did not categorize students' concerns by the level of importance. I figured that if it was significant to them, it should be important for me to listen and take the time to follow up.

I found that students become discouraged, angry, and cynical about the school system and those in it when adults failed to pay attention to their concerns, as small as they might have appeared. As a steward attempting to resolve the students' concerns, I did not do all the work myself; I enlisted the assistance and involvement of as many people as necessary to resolve problems, issues or concerns. Then, I ensured these matters were resolved through follow-up conversations.

In Chapter Four, I narrated the experience of my acquaintance who was enrolled in the superintendent certification program at a different university than the ones I attended. The professor told him not to worry about school district matters and board member concerns because "it is their district, their schools, their students, not yours." This statement may be true in one sense, but is utterly false in another. It is true if superintendents perceive themselves only as the highest paid employee expected to manage the district from afar, including student issues, on behalf of the school board. On the other hand, the statement is false if superintendents view themselves as the "stewards" of all matters pertaining to the district, especially students. The superintendent "owns" the responsibility to act on behalf of students. They stand as the stewards of their safety, education, and wellbeing.

In my case, any concerns that students brought to my attention became my issues. In finding ways to assist them, guide them, or support them, I felt I acted on behalf of "my kids," "my schools," "my district" and "my community." My conjecture was that my sense of ownership and stewardship of students' issues were a precursor to becoming an agent of social capital for students. This mindset recognized the authority entrusted to me to guide the district towards positive outcomes, which was ultimately my responsibility. Budgeting and allocation of resources and personnel are among my duties. This authority gave me the flexibility to resolve

the plethora of issues brought to me by students or parents. I believed, and continue to believe, that one of the superintendent's roles is to mobilize the resources of the district to benefit students, particularly the most vulnerable. One example was the allocation of resources for the purchase of additional musical instruments, iPads, and Chromebooks for students who could not afford them. By doing this, I empowered students, parents, community, teachers, and administrators to become agents of social change. These interactions brought me the strongest sense of satisfaction and enjoyment even though, in some cases, these concerns were not resolved to their satisfaction.

In many instances, fully addressing their issues and requests would have required the violation of district policy, administrative regulations or law. That, I would not do. I did not expect nor would I direct any one to break or circumvent the rules. However, in the absence of any legal or ethical restrictions, helping and assisting students by working and soliciting feedback from others, particularly the superintendent's cabinet and principals became one of my highest priorities. Our collective work did not mean a sense of noblesse oblige, but rather a sense of stewardship by using the district's resources on behalf of students, particularly for those with the greatest needs.

A key finding within this theme is that good stewardship of district resources helps to alleviate the feelings of anger and cynicism of students who felt the district was not meeting their needs. I found a collective effort to support students is the ideal. It is important for the superintendent to create synergy, which will produce a more powerful student support system than the superintendent can produce working in isolation.

My belief is that I should treat students as I do my own children. I also view the prudent management of district assets as highly important as it pertains to being an effective agent of

social capital. I believe that team efforts work best. Therefore, my practice was to mobilize the resources of the district with a shared purpose of benefiting students, particularly the most vulnerable. These beliefs and practices are responsive to Research Question Two.

## **Service**

Stewardship and service have many commonalities. From the very beginning of my appointment, I began to see my position as one of service, not power. I subscribed to the concept of servant leadership as espoused by Robert K. Greenleaf (1904-1990), who in 1970 coined that term. His definition of service leadership resonated with me, particularly the way he articulated the test of a servant leader. He stated:

The best test is: do those served grow as persons: do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?

And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived? (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 22)

This definition embodied the totality of my advocacy for students and the way I viewed my role and myself. Service was perhaps the most influential concept in the development of my role as an institutional agent of social capital. I found that being a true servant involves the creative and unselfish allocation of resources. For example, when one of the assistant superintendents retired, because of funding challenges the district was facing due to decreased enrollment, I did not replace the position. I used the funds to hire two additional teachers. One of the teachers, assigned to the new medical academy, provided students with the opportunity of an additional certification as emergency medical technicians. The second teacher, placed at another high school, taught coding to students interested in pursuing a career in engineering.

I absorbed all the supervisory responsibilities of each department previously supervised by the assistant superintendent. In addition, for two consecutive years, I declined the school board's proposal to increase my salary. One of these years the board ultimately increased my salary without my request. The academic needs of students were my priority. My own comfort or financial gain was less important. I did not value the net worth of my role by the amount of a paycheck; rather, as I learned at a very young age, the value of serving others was more rewarding and satisfying. I believed this was the lesson of my grandmother in action; work for the "honor of serving others" not for the "pursuit of money."

My interactions with students, and subsequent actions taken on their behalf, as described in Chapter Four, would not have been possible unless I was willing to serve. I made a conscious choice to position myself in the social network of students with the sole purpose of addressing their needs. Being a faithful agent of social capital demanded my actions on behalf of students. Resulting improvements may not have been possible absent of this service mindset.

The concept of service, of course, is not foreign to the superintendency. In fact, the first standards developed for school leaders in 1996 included the concept of service to families and students. Specifically, the standards stated, "The administrator believes in, values, and is committed to: . . . using the influence of one's office constructively and productively in the service of all students and their families" (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996, p. 18). Similarly, the most recent standards dedicate an entire standard (Standard 5) to the concept of service by recommending that school leaders cultivate a "community of care and support for students" (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, p. 13).

These new standards, while presenting a "rich and exciting opportunities for educational leaders to innovate and inspire staff to pursue new, creative approaches for improving schools

and promoting student learning” (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, p. 13), may require a change in practice and relationships between administrators, particularly superintendents, and the students they serve. My study provided vivid examples of what service on behalf of students looks like from the perspective of a practicing superintendent. These examples are not for “self-gratification or glorification as would a celebrity CEO” (Morris, Brotheridge, & Urbanski, 2005, p. 1339), but rather stand as examples of the change that I think is possible in the lives of students when superintendents are willing to transform their roles to become institutional agents.

A key finding in this section is that my grandmother’s lessons of service to others greatly influenced by views of leadership. I also found that being a true servant involves the creative and unselfish allocation of resources. To this end, I rejected salary increases proposed by the board and did not replace a central office position. I assumed the duties of this job. Savings from these actions resulted in hiring two teachers to serve students.

These findings are responsive to Research Questions One and Two, addressing factors that influenced my role as superintendent and beliefs, practices and complexities, respectively. My grandmother instilled a great sense of service in me. I believe that a service mindset is required in being a true agent of social capital. My practices, therefore, were to decline salary increases and to hire teachers instead of replacing central office administrators. My practice was also to assume additional duties left by the departing official.

### **Supporting change**

When a group of business executives visited my office soon after my appointment as superintendent, one of the questions they asked me was, “What will be different during your tenure?” My immediate response was “change,” not for the sake of change but for improving the

educational experiences of students by listening to their voices. They are my most important stakeholders; it is my privilege to serve them. I explained that a school district may have the greatest programs, beautiful buildings, and highly competent people, but if it does not have students, nothing else matters. I explained that students had been the forgotten stakeholders in the decision making of the superintendent. I closed the meeting with this statement, “I will listen to the voices of students and make decisions accordingly.”

My front-line approach was a drastic “change” in and of itself. Teachers, administrators, and the school board were not accustomed to my style of working directly with students. They did not recognize the practice of a superintendent providing his personal cell phone number to parents and students. They had never witnessed the chief district officer eating with them, while constantly engaged in conversation.

Parents repeatedly informed me that they had never heard of a superintendent who was as involved with students. I usually replied; “When I say I see your children as my own, I mean it.” Not all teachers and administrators appreciated my approach, however. My impression was they felt I was undermining their decisions. However, in some cases, I took personal action to protect students. I believed that in these instances, I could focus on either the academic and personal well-being of students or the comfort of adults. As Wagner (2010) stated, an “educational system cannot have it both ways” (p. 125).

This autoethnography is also an example of change. While I did not focus on the study of organizational change, theory or development, my study, as stated earlier, revealed a dual diagnosis as I attempted to learn my role as a superintendent and transform an entire organization at the same time. In other words, my study revealed to me that of self-reflection—which led me to action—and to the organizational change that occurred in my district. I also realized that

unlike much of the research conducted around superintendents, this study sought to bridge the gap between the top tier of administration and our most valuable stakeholders, students.

In this study, I narrated stories of my interactions with students, discussing how these conversations led to change. More importantly, as we proceeded on this journey together, the students' perceptions of me began to change, as did the way I viewed my role. From the time of my appointment, I made a conscious decision to see my role as different from the traditional norms and expectations simply by being inclusive.

From the simple things, such as eating lunch with students, to the larger issues, such as the passage of a multimillion-dollar bond, my story as a superintendent was one of change. During this process, I realized that emerging initiatives and actions could be ephemeral, unless we made efforts to sustain not only the immediate changes, but more importantly, to make the concept of social capital an ingrained part of the district's culture. Thus, I learned that it was not sufficient for me to act summarily to remedy individual problems because solutions may be fleeting and isolated. There needed to be sustainable and systemic change. The entire organization had to embrace this philosophy to leave a lasting legacy after my departure. Thus, programs such as "Count Down to Zero" were implemented at every high school. In this case, all high school students were tracked, monitored, encouraged and provided with the assistance necessary to ensure they earned all the credits for graduation. Similarly, all departments set aside funding for paid internships at the central office to assist students with sources of income and employment.

I came to the realization that a more effective way to deal with the multiple issues facing students demanded the involvement of everyone in the school system. Everyone should be or become an agent of social capital for students, not just teachers, counselors, or social workers.

Therefore, I continued to model, provided training and deployed other strategies to ensure that all levels of personnel understood the concept and were able to take appropriate actions to support students.

There were several major findings within this theme. I found most stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, and administrators, did not understand the changes brought about my efforts as an agent for social capital. They even felt threatened.

These findings address Research Question Two, which relates to beliefs, practices, and complexities. It was my belief that my isolated decision-making did not promote lasting and systemic change in the district. Therefore, I employed the practices of modeling, training, and other strategies to encourage staff throughout the school system to embrace and act upon this concept.

### **Resistance to change**

Throughout the district, stakeholders noticed the validation of students' voices. This affirmation revealed a lack of communication between the organizational levels of the school system. The duality of my role created tensions among some groups and individuals. For example, some perceived that I was neglecting my responsibilities of directly supervising the departments and attending to central office business because I spent so much time in the schools. Initially, some concluded that students had more "authority" than the educators who are responsible for them. Critics also argued that students and parents did not have to follow a "chain of command" when they could go directly to the superintendent. My data revealed a different story.

When parents called me, I did not perceive it as a failure of the administration or teachers to do their jobs. I saw myself as another resource to resolve the problems and concerns

of parents and students. In the final analysis, they did not much care who in the hierarchy of the school system helped them resolve their concerns, what mattered most was that “the district” found the solution. Yet others praised me for my “openness” and “availability” to all stakeholders.

I constantly received appreciation from these stakeholders for the “prompt responses” to their concerns, phone calls and messages. However, there were skeptics. The most shocking resistance to my approach came from a parent. This individual was unaccustomed to receiving the personal cell phone of the superintendent and to communicating directly with him. This parent accused me of being disingenuous. She speculated that I gave her my cell phone number only because I was “hiding something, there has to be a chain of command. No parent should go directly to the superintendent, much less call him on his personal cell phone.”

The way to address this challenge was simple. I acknowledged that the parent was correct and gave her grievance policies and forms to file a complaint. The parent never filed a grievance and I did not hear from her again. However, I think the point here is that this parent was the exception to the rule. Most community members were appreciative for my availability and responsiveness. In fact, I believe our evolving inclusive approach has been a key factor in the decrease of formal grievances filed since my appointment as superintendent. Over the past four years, only one employee complaint has reached the board level and no parent or student concerns. We are able to find quick solutions to problems face-to-face. Issues do not simmer to a boiling point, resulting in time-consuming and costly grievances and litigation. Perhaps this skeptical parent ultimately realized that my intentions were good and therefore did not employ formal means to resolve the issue at hand.

In pursuing the change I wanted to implement in my school district, I accepted the fact that I would encounter criticism, challenges, disappointments, and even threats for speaking and advocating on behalf of students. My early experience with the alternative school illustrates the contradictory and complex nature of resistant schools and communities.

When I proposed the relocation of the alternative school, not only did I face verbal opposition from the community, I was also physically threatened. The idea of “social justice” for some individuals in the crowd apparently included the denigrations and humiliation of students who lived in the same community they pretended to protect. Yet, I continued with the plan to relocate the school because I would never allow the students and faculty to teach and learn in such deplorable conditions. I am confident that these same parents would have been outraged had the conditions of the original alternative school been the same for their children.

From the alternative school experience, I learned that being an agent of social capital could be a sophisticated, and at times stressful game of chess. You have to keep your eyes on all the pieces and contemplate future moves, before making an immediate choice. In this case, perhaps, I should have anticipated the subversive actions of the middle school administration and the high degree of opposition from the surrounding community; not that this forecast would have changed my ultimate plan, but it would have helped me implement it more effectively considering multiple factors.

### **Resistance to Policy**

Enforcement of existing policy also prompted resistance. The goal of eliminating the practice of student retention was district policy; a provision well informed by a large body of research that reveals the detrimental effects of retaining students. Some principals actually resigned, in part, because of my enforcement of this provision. To compound the dispute, some

board members received calls complaining that the superintendent initiated this change through his faulty interpretation of policy. Some principals sent parents to the central office to convince me that retention was “good for their children.” However, I continued to enforce this policy in the face of opposition. I discuss student retentions further and the solutions I proposed in subsequent sections of this chapter.

To address the myriad of complexities associated with my job required what my pastor once called, “a backbone, not a wishbone.” He meant that an individual must have the conviction to do the right thing and the fortitude to stand firm, regardless of the pressure. I realized that doing the right thing involved gaining input from multiple sources prior to making important decisions. I found that this collective practice increased a sense of ownership for choices made, which increased the probability of success. It also benefited decision making by gaining input from those who were closest to the action and in a position to know.

I often stated to the leadership team that, “collectively, all of us are smarter than a single one of us.” I insisted that “we must hold each other accountable to do the right thing.” I also concluded that as an agent of social capital for all students, I must not succumb to public pressure for political expediency. I must not be distracted from my mission by the resistance of others to change at the expense of students’ interests. However, I did need to listen to and understand the resistance in order to make sound decisions in the best interests of the students.

There are a several significant findings emerging from this theme. I found that superintendents acting as agents of social capital should expect criticism. In my case, accusations of neglecting my “traditional responsibilities” and circumventing the chain of command were common. Certain actions, such as the enforcement of the retention policy and relocation of the alternative school, also drew scrutiny. Additionally, I found that parents and students did not care

who in the district addressed their concerns, as long as they were resolved. I discovered what initially appeared to be simple and straightforward issues were actually multifaceted and complex. Finally, I found that making the right decisions demands fortitude and “backbone” in the midst of obstacles. However, gaining input from multiple sources before making critical decisions was advantageous to the superintendent who acts as an agent of social capital.

These findings addressed Research Question Two and Three regarding practices, beliefs and complexities and information useful to administrators. I did not think that my actions as an agent of social capital circumvented the chain of command for the reason that all school administrators understood, by my words and actions, that I viewed myself as another resource for parents and students and we worked as a team to address those concerns. I also embraced the idea that a team effort was required to resolve the complex problems the students, schools, and district faced. I, therefore, employed the practice of shared decision-making. Furthermore, as a steward of the district’s resources and the students’ wellbeing, I did not believe retaining students was an efficacious practice. Therefore, we deployed alternative measures to address academic deficiencies. I fervently believed that housing students in deplorable facilities was unacceptable, thus my decision to relocate the alternative school. I recognized that these matters are complex and require thoughtful deliberation prior to action.

In terms of useful information gained from this study that could benefit school leaders, administrators should be aware of the possible adverse effects of district policies, particularly negative impacts on minority and economically disadvantaged students. To this end, prior to adopting a new policy, an impact analysis may be in order. Additionally, periodic review of existing policy could be beneficial. Examples in this study are discussed in the sections below.

## **Reviewing policy and change**

I also faced challenges in the proposal, amendment or deletion of policies that, in my view, affected the most vulnerable students. Recommendations included the elimination of district graduation requirements not codified in state law and the removal of non-academic policies. Policies that prevented low socioeconomic students from obtaining parking permits were detrimental to certain kinds of students and therefore I proposed eliminating them. These students did not have the required vehicle insurance to obtain a parking permit. Due to this fact, the school lots were empty. One of the unintended consequences of these policies was that it impacted students that were marginalized due to financial issues. This policy pushed students to park on the opposite side of the street. Heavy traffic next to the school created an unsafe and potentially deadly condition for students.

I also enforced existing policies previously ignored by the administration. I found that policies adopted by the board and operations at the school level were incongruent. For instance, most teachers and principals routinely ignored policies that placed restrictions on student retention. Noncompliance resulted in the retention of large numbers of students. The tension with principals over this issue was almost palpable. Two principals ignored my directives not to retain students. I requested a portfolio of interventions before making any recommendations for the retention of students. These principals continued to retain students without my consent or board approval. To me, this was insubordination and showed the disconnect between policy implementation and enforcement. It also revealed a systemic flaw where the responsibility of teachers and administrators to implement district policy was supplanted by their personal beliefs on student retention that ultimately were detrimental to at-risk students.

I held a meeting with each principal. At these stressful meetings, I aimed to explain the inequalities that the policies addressed and the inequities perpetuated by noncompliance. Frustrated, one of the principals eventually left the school district. A third principal openly challenged me at a principals' meeting. She stated her intention to conduct her own research on student retentions because she was not convinced that the policy of the district was "good for kids."

I welcomed her challenge because it was also important for personnel to undertake research, even if it proves me wrong. I would rather have them express their concerns and explore rather than have their frustrations grow, potentially affecting those around them. Surprisingly, the principal was confident enough to inform me that I was correct. She concluded that the research was generally in agreement with my direction in this area. Retention is detrimental to students.

We conducted a comprehensive review of the district's finance policies and procedures in view of a lawsuit brought by plaintiffs who alleged the inequitable distribution of resources within the school system. The findings indicated that allocations to schools were fair and just. However, it is important to remain vigilant in terms of how funds are distributed, especially when resources are limited and needs are high. It is also important to periodically review all district policies. This can be done as part of the superintendent's cabinet meetings.

Key finding within this theme involve the understanding and application of district policies. Specifically, superintendents who are agents of social capital must be active at the policy level in order to ensure fair and just application, particularly as some rules adversely affect students with the greatest needs. Examples included parking regulations that prevented economically disadvantaged students from using the school's parking lot, relegating them to

unsafe locations and the lack of enforcement of retention policies that limited this practice. I found that the superintendent must have the fortitude to challenge noncompliant administrators who may have strong convictions about the value of retention and the overall view to examine policies that may promote or tacitly support discriminatory practices. I also found that the regular monitoring of finance policies and procedures was vital to ensuring equitable distribution of funds within the district with an understanding that some students need more support than others.

Again, this theme is responsive to Research Question Two, involving practices, beliefs, and complexities. My practice was to review and recommend amendments to policies that adversely affected the most vulnerable students and to enforce existing policies that protected students from adverse treatment, which involved confronting principals with opposing views. This process involved complex situations in which the superintendent had to navigate and mitigate competing beliefs in the best interests of students.

### **Retention of students**

My review of student retention emerged from my visits to schools and direct communication with students. The problem emerged when a student asked me to move her to the next grade level, I learned from the student's records of her retention four years earlier. Administrators took this action "for language reasons." This led me to conduct a district-wide investigation where I found some very disturbing information. As stated in Chapter Four, I reviewed all student retentions for the past five years and discovered a strong correlation between student retentions, at any grade level, with high school dropouts. Furthermore, some schools used student retention as "an intervention" for students who were not performing at grade level. My findings also indicated that student retention offered insignificant benefits, if any, to retained students.

My inquiry into student retention brought back unpleasant memories of my formative years in education twenty-five years earlier when assigned to a permanent position as a first-grade substitute teacher. My class of fourteen students included three retained students. Not knowing this fact, I did not understand why the students resisted going to any school functions. They also “hated to go to lunch” or to physical education class. The students later shared their feelings towards the school, their peers, and the teacher who retained them. The emotional pain that these students exhibited left me with a profound conviction against the failed practice of retention.

As a teacher, principal, and as superintendent, the literature that I reviewed contended retention causes “negative and often harmful effects on academic achievement and other educational outcomes” (Reynolds, 1992, p. 1). Unfortunately, my findings also suggested that retained students were usually minority students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and/or students receiving special education services.

After consultation with the superintendent’s cabinet and in an effort to enforce school board policy, I directed all principals to stop the practice. We placed students who were not at grade level in the next grade level with an intervention plan to help them succeed academically. Subsequently, students retained before my arrival were encouraged, with the consent of their parents, to take the test during the grade acceleration window. This testing window permits students, under district policy and state law, to take a test to exit out of a grade and promoted to the next one if they are successful. The district covered the costs associated with ordering and shipping.

Unfortunately, only a handful of students requested the test and only a few of them were successful. Students who were not, in most cases, qualified for special education services

sometime between the time of retention and taking the grade level exit test. These students, however, were not receiving special education services when retained. However, retention was not the solution in the first place. The district should have provided the support for them to continue with their peers instead of employing retention, thus avoiding the social, emotional and educational damage associated with this practice. Addressing this issue helped the district understand the deleterious effects of student retention and be prepared to help future generation of students so they do not fall through the cracks again.

A key finding in this section was that agents of social capital should use research to inform policy and practice and not assume others in the district are doing the same. In this case, studies on student retention indicated that this practice is mostly detrimental to students, particularly those from high minority and economically disadvantaged populations. I also found effective intervention strategies are imperative to address the needs of academically struggling students in the absence of retention.

These findings are responsive to Research Questions One, Two, and Three addressing factors that influenced my role as superintendent; beliefs, practices and complexities; and useful information for administrators, respectively. As a substitute teacher, I witnessed the suffering and anguish of a group of retained first graders. This experience coupled with my knowledge of research on the subject inspired a strong conviction against this practice. I believe in the deployment of intervention measures in lieu of retention. The fact that this practice has a particularly harmful impact on the most vulnerable students, my students, further strengthens this passionate belief.

In respect to useful information gained for administrators, research should inform policy and practice, particularly as it pertains to the adverse effects on minority and economically

disadvantaged populations. Superintendents must maintain vigilance in terms of the impacts of policy and its possible discriminatory effects and stay abreast of current research.

### **Addressing the needs of low socioeconomic status and minority students**

From an analysis of the data in my journal, I found that the presence of family members (or lack thereof) has a significant impact on a student's social, emotional and educational wellbeing. Particularly, a connection with mother or father figures was critical. *Familia*, the code I used to identify this factor in my journal, appeared numerous times.

In my interactions with students, I found that many low socioeconomic and at-risk students, all of them of Hispanic origin, were often alone with no family members to help them maneuver through the educational system or to navigate life obstacles. Students could not rely on the assistance of the immediate family in numerous cases. This was a striking finding, which led me to question the conventional wisdom that Hispanic family “members can find help on a regular basis” (Sabogal, Marín, Otero-Sabogal, Marín, & Perez-Stable, 1987, p. 398). This literature does not hold true based on the findings of my study.

While my experience growing up in extreme poverty and a broken home helped me to understand and empathize with low socioeconomic, minority and at-risk students, I did not expect to find that the concept of family as an important institution was only a myth to them. However, my findings are consistent with other research that concluded that minority youth, particularly children of foreign-born Latinos, are most isolated and often lack the support of and guidance from family members (Briggs, 1998).

### **District initiatives to help students**

In addition, disadvantaged students also need district resources to place them on a level playing field with their more affluent counterparts. This was about equity, that some students

needed support to help erase the disadvantages they experience. In terms of technology, the district invested in Chromebooks for all students in the district and iPads for the younger students in Pre-Kinder and Kinder students. In addition, the district invested in upgrading the network infrastructure for faster Internet capabilities for all students and teachers. This was done in an effort to ensure they had the tools they need to success. Furthermore, in an effort to expose students to the world outside their neighborhoods, I took groups of students along with me to the State of the City, State of the County, State of the Military addresses and other functions, normally reserved for high-level officials.

Another initiative addressed the need to increase high school graduation rates and college attendance. Low socioeconomic students are less likely to attend a university compared to peers that are more affluent. In an effort to have students recognize the importance of graduating from high school and going to college, we transformed our graduations to mirror the pomp and circumstance associated with college ceremonies. Additionally, a grand gala celebrated the accomplishment of completing high school. I believe this improved graduation ceremony and new gala worked to inspire students, particularly the underprivileged, to reach for the stars. The district's graduation and college attendance rates have steadily increased. I attribute this improvement, in part, to these enhanced ceremonies. I have followed up by tracking our graduate students to see how they are succeeding and if we at this level need to do more to ensure success in the future.

Through these examples, I gained a deeper understanding of the term *in loco parentis*, which means "in place of the parents." This concept usually refers to educators who act in the parents' stead. I now fully embrace this concept and encourage others to do the same. My experience revealed that in many cases, students depended on school personnel to help them deal

with school and personal issues because they had nowhere else to go, and in many instances, educators were the students' only "family."

A significant finding within this discussion was that educators must often assume the role of parents when serving minority and low-income populations. I found that these students were frequently alone without the support of parents to help them negotiate the educational system and life in general. In most cases, the students came from dysfunctional families or, in some cases; students were living alone as their migrant parents moved from job to job across the country. Another key finding was contrary to the conventional wisdom and literature that suggests Hispanic families generally provide good support systems (Sabogal, Marín, Otero-Sabogal, Marín, & Perez-Stable, 1987); in many cases of my study, they did not.

In addition, I found that low-income students often do not have access to vital technology resources at home, placing them at an educational disadvantage. Another finding was that these students do not have ready access to the world outside their neighborhoods. The district can and should use its resources to compensate for these inequities. Finally, I found that underprivileged students are inspired to graduate from high school and attend college by special graduation ceremonies and galas to celebrate their success.

These findings are responsive to Research Questions One, Two, and Three addressing factors that influenced my role as superintendent; beliefs, practices and complexities; and useful information for administrators, respectively. I believe, based on my experiences, not all Hispanic households provide adequate support structures for children. In fact, many do not. My practice is to assume the place of the parents, when required, to assist students in need. Reflections of my own upbringing in which my father was absent much of the time, resources were scarce and I

depended on external support systems to thrive, fuel my passion to fill gaps left by absence parents.

Based on these finding, it is my position that the district has a moral responsibility to fill these gaps. Additionally, educators must foster opportunities for these students to experience the world beyond their relatively isolated neighborhoods. It is, therefore my practice to extend technological resources to students' homes and to facilitate learning experiences in the wider world.

Administrators interested in this realm of advocacy should stand prepared to embrace the role of the parents to help students maneuver through the complexities of this world. They must also consider their moral responsibility to provide district resources, such as computers, Wi-Fi, and learning opportunities outside the district, to level the educational playing field. School leaders should be aware of ceremonial functions that can inspire students to graduate and attend college.

### **Exploring the family dynamic**

During my visits with students, however, the usual focus of recorded data centered on the father, typically the absence of a father or a father figure. In the vast majority of my interactions with students, particularly private discussions regarding discipline, academics, goal setting, graduation, and future aspirations, inevitably conversations led to comments about their home life. Many of the higher need students revealed that they did not have a father. Without the guidance of fathers, these students struggled to find their way and endured associated problems.

As narrated in Chapter One, the absence of my father undoubtedly contributed to my belief that students without the presence of a father or father figure needed the most attention and assistance. Consequently, for students who revealed the absence of a father, through a divorce or

abandonment, death, and in some cases, deportation, I scheduled biweekly meetings to follow-up and find ways to encourage and motivate them. Administrators and counselors were also reminded to pay close attention to these students. In addition, the partnership with Communities in Schools helped to support these students.

A key finding here was the story of students growing up with single mothers and absent fathers. Based on my experience, they make a profound difference in the lives of their children. When the father is absent, the burden shifts to the mother who takes on a role of both parents. This theme revealed answers to Research Question One and Two, which addresses, factors that influenced my role as superintendent and practices, beliefs and complexities. In terms of influential factors, the absence of my father motivated me to engage in the lives of similarly situated students. Concerning practice, I spent a great deal of time intervening on behalf of these students, in this case, scheduling regular meetings to monitor their progress and communicating with other staff to coordinate efforts. I also spent time communicating with their mother to find ways to support them. These actions became part of my heartfelt practice. The absence of significant family members was not the only challenge faced by the students in this study; they also faced financial obstacles.

### **Understanding the financial burden of students**

The findings also revealed the financial burdens of students. Usually, the mother worked two or three jobs to manage the financial responsibility of the family. In most cases, these students worked to assist their mother financially. As they reached high school age, work and the financial necessities of the family took priority over the demands of school. While the primary focus of my research was not about the absence of a father, my analysis revealed this factor as dominant theme. My journal review clearly showed that the absence of the father or father figure

impaired the student's ability in successfully navigating school structures and processes, particularly at the middle and high school levels.

My interactions with these students revealed they lacked the confidence to approach administrators or me for assistance as other students did. I took the initiative to seek out these students; otherwise, there would have been no interactions. During these meetings, I gained an understanding of their needs, which helped me find ways to help them. For example, some of these students were seniors and did not know what FAFSA (Federal Application for Federal Student Aid) was, even though the high schools and the district continued to have the highest FAFSA completion rates in the county. Evidently, the district's counselors and administrators are doing a good job providing information to students and families. However, I discovered that in some cases, students who had jobs after school to assist the family were not present at FAFSA presentations.

These students usually left school early to go to work or to take care of family matters. As one student told me, "Since my dad left us, I am the man of the house. Sir, I don't have time for much of anything after school" (Journal entry, March 8, 2015). I asked administrators to identify students whose fathers were not present in their lives. I asked them to work with counselors to provide assistance and find alternative ways to provide information to them. I also followed up by meeting with any additional students who were in the same situation, as identified by principals. To assist these students financially, I encouraged them to apply to the paid student internship program that I initiated. Some students did. Two graduated and remained employed with the district while they attended college.

Coleman's theory of social capital helped me understand the challenges of the students described above. My experience was congruent with the idea that the physical presence or

absence of a biological parent determines access to social capital in the life of a child. Thus, the departure of a parent diminishes the opportunities for transmission of educational expectations, behavior and human capital of a child (Coleman, 1988). “This (absence of parent) in turn raises the probability that adolescents drop out of school” (Menning, 2006, p. 1359).

I learned the hard way from my experience dealing with students that these research findings were indeed true. Three students dropped out of school and I was not able to convince them to stay and finish. Two of the students became parents themselves. I found that unless the school system identifies these students as early as possible and provides support, mentorship and guidance to alleviate the lack of social capital in the home, the students will most likely drop out of school.

Beyond the loss of social and human capital associated with the absence of a father, the deleterious effects of growing up without a biological father also include higher risks of depression (Booth, Scott, & King, 2010), substance abuse, and other unacceptable behaviors (Comanor & Phillips, 2002; Harper & McLanahan, 2004; Matsueda & Heimer, 1987). These findings are important because they suggest these students may need additional support beyond the normal assistance afforded to other students.

In summary, this discussion reveals the decline of social capital associated with the absence of fathers in the lives of many minority and low-socioeconomic students. It also challenges the idea of high levels of Hispanic family cohesion and support among family members, and the prevailing concept that the family is the “most important institution” (Sabogal et al., 1987, p. 398). I always believed in this concept, but experience tells me that it is false. I learned that when the family is not available to support students, as I told school principals, “assume they are orphans, they belong to us.”

A significant finding was that economically disadvantaged students often placed the needs of the family above academic interests. I also found that these students were less likely to participate in FAFSA presentations due to family obligations. Finally, I found proactive approaches to reaching these students work.

This discussion is responsive to Research Questions Two and Three, which address practices, beliefs and complexities and information useful to administrators, respectively. It was my belief that the school is obligated to seek out these students and find alternative ways to serve them.

Superintendents wishing to become agents of social capital can use this information by identifying students who do not have a father or a father figure in their lives to work with them as early as possible to provide support and prevent them from dropping out of school. If educational leaders want to serve the best interests of students, particularly those with the greatest needs, they should use proactive approaches to ensure inclusivity and promote success.

### **Self-reflections**

Self-reflection became an integral part of my research. My journal captured both the description of events and my thoughts or interpretation about them. These entries helped me understand my life story. They helped me comprehend how I dealt with adversity. This self-reflection manifested itself in a number of emotional states of mind. Many times, after hearing the students' stories or visiting their homes and seeing the conditions of poverty in which they lived, I got in my car and simply sobbed. Their experiences mirrored mine. Their struggles were my own. I did not have time to cry, as my world was constantly changing when I was growing up. Remembering my own life continued to evoke deep memories and emotions emanating from my past.

Feelings of anger were pervasive in my writing. Anger appeared to be a contributing factor in many of my administrative actions and decisions. In Chapter Four, I stated that I was “furious” with the condition of the alternative school, “infuriated” with the retention of students and treatment of parents, “not happy” that students were borrowing instruments from another school district, “angry” that students returned from another school district without the proper credits for graduation, and “perplexed” about the deaths of three students.

During my meetings with students, they often shared their financial, academic, social, and emotional struggles, resulting from the abandonment or neglect of the father. Their tears and agony worked to open wounds from my past. One of the journal entries reads as follows, “I met with Angela today. It is absurd that he (her father) withdrew her from school just to make her life miserable. How can a father do that to his daughter? Does he not realize the importance of school? He is a total idiot. I will not allow it, no matter what happens” (Field journal entry, March 17, 2017).

On this particular day, I received a call from the principal telling me that she was making plans to register the student at another district because the father, after withdrawing her from school, was sending the sheriff to arrest her. I stopped what I was doing, went to the school, met with the student and the counselor and registered the student again without the consent of the father. I sent her back to class and stayed at the school until dismissal, expecting the father or the sheriff to show up. They never did. The counselor arranged for the student to live somewhere else for the remainder of the school year until graduation.

I learned that, as a superintendent who sees himself as an agent of social capital, I must be willing to “interrupt” the day and take the risks necessary to truly advocate on behalf of students. This practice may require taking action in favor of students against the wishes of their

own families. My belief was, and continues to be, that I must do for others (my students) as others did for me.

Anger, stemming from the abandonment of my father, was a constant dark companion throughout my formative years. While I grew up in a very stable and nurturing family with my grandmother, I greatly resented my father even though I did not know him. In Chapter Four, I described how my resentment against my father increased when I went to live with him in Whittier, California, and then intensified when he rejected me upon my return from Mexico after visiting my grandmother. During my interactions with students, I often witnessed the simmering anger I once held. Anger resurrected in me every time I learned of the struggles of my students resulting from “the stupidity of adults” (Field journal entry, April 8, 2016). My hope was not to replace the father figure, but to provide a role model either with myself or with teachers and administrators.

As a superintendent, my personal experience growing up helped me to understand that anger is a common feeling in adolescents associated with the departure of a father (Lopez & Corona, 2012), but I struggled to distance myself from their struggles. My immediate instincts were to find ways to help, to be the father figure, to resolve the problem and to provide assistance. However, I found it most gratifying when students, including those who graduated, called me for assistance. They asked for help in various areas, including finding a job, a letter of recommendation, assistance with family matters and finances, and a multitude of other issues.

Undoubtedly, every time I recorded a journal entry, I fondly remembered the actions of those who served on my behalf in the past. La Serna High School in Whittier, El Paso High School, and the church that I joined after graduating from high school all provided invaluable

support. I realize that not all students have these avenues nor will they chose them. But having exposure to leaders in schools, community leaders can help shape the youths of the district.

As I made sense of these positive influences in my own life, I realized that while several “institutional agents” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1075) played significant roles, it was the church that had the most influence. The concept of social capital had a ubiquitous presence in this place of worship. I desired to emulate the many role models and professionals attending the church.

As stated in Chapter Four, the church introduced me to greater opportunities, support, role models, and the expectation that I would go to college. I was also taught that the ethical principle of the golden rule, “do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matt. 7:12, New Revised Standard Version), must be practiced. My church experiences introduced me to the concepts and teachings of one of the founders of the church who wrote that when serving others, you must “enter into their feelings, their difficulties, their disappointments, their joys, and their sorrows. Identify yourself with them and then do to them as if you were to exchange places with them, you would wish them to deal with you” (White, 2002, p. 420).

Because of these experiences and teachings, I see my role as a superintendent differently. These experiences propelled me to become a better person and a better superintendent. I am able to understand students well, empathize with them and help them because someone along my journey helped me. In particular, I strive to create an educational system in my district viewed by students and their parents in the same way I viewed my church. I envision a district with an inspiring vision, the pursuit of a mission, and the commitment to act on behalf of all students, particularly those who need us most.

## **Purpose and spirituality**

While scholars and academics may eschew spiritual overtones or religious symbolism, particularly in public education with expectations of religious neutrality, I found immense value in the lessons I learned in my youth, lessons that I attempted to apply to my role as a superintendent of schools. While I never attempted to teach spiritual lessons to students, I began to see my own spiritual belief as “that internal mechanism that guides human beings to make meaning for their lives, to establish purpose for themselves, to enter into connections or relationships with others, and serves as the facility for people to create through inspired imagination” (Dantley, 20003, p.3).

In my attempt to see myself as an agent of social capital for students, and to understand my role, and myself, I found that I was not alone in embracing unconventional concepts. The language of religion and spirituality has appeared in writings of researchers. Paul Houston, (2001), for example, as the former director of the American Association of School Administrators, and a former superintendent for seventeen years in three states, asserts that superintendents are called to “shepherd other people’s children” (Houston, 2001, p. 429). He encouraged a transformation of the superintendent’s role, in response to the deterioration of the family and the loss of social capital. In the twenty-first century, he remarked, superintendents must be adept at creating a network of support for families and their children.

My views closely align to Houston’s (2011). Thus my role as the superintendent who sees himself as an agent of social capital and “acts to directly transmit, or negotiate the transmission of, highly valued institutional support...resources, opportunities privileges, and services” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1076) on behalf of students, expresses the very ideals of

doing for others what was done for me. In doing so, I am following in the footsteps of the school principal, teacher, friend and pastor who advocated on my behalf in my formative years.

I shared my own story with the aim of giving students hope for a better future. Yet, a paradox emerged every time; a motivation grounded in anger propelled me to continue finding ways to help students. This is a narrative of bad evolving into good and negatives fueling positives. I often told myself, and wrote in my journal, “If you are not using your position and authority as a superintendent to help students, get out of the way” (Journal entry, April 19, 2015).

A key finding within the final reflections theme is that superintendents serving as agents of social capital must be willing to break their routines and take risks in the interests of students. I also found that strong emotions, including anger, elicited by formative experiences could inspire a superintendent’s propensity towards goodness. Additionally, my spiritual beliefs provided a strong moral compass to guide my leadership and service.

This section is responsive to all three of the research questions. My early experiences influenced my decision to become an agent of social capital. A predominate feeling of anger, particularly with my father, emanated from my past when I witnessed the situations and circumstances of my students, who have similar backgrounds. I channeled my anger in productive ways to make positive differences in the lives of the students. Also, buoyed by memories of those outside my family who lifted me when I was down, I stayed the course. My early church experiences also influenced my leadership. Spiritual lessons guided many of my decisions and actions.

I believe agility is important as it applies to agents of social capital. They must be willing to depart quickly from their schedules in the service of students. It is my practice to leave meetings at the central office to attend to the needs of a student in crisis. Risk taking is also an

imperative, within the confines of law and policy of course. I believe many spiritual lessons are congruent with the philosophy of social capital. My practice has been to treat students and parents the way that I would want to be treated.

Superintendents and other administrators should learn from my story that becoming an agent of social capital in a high needs district is a calling, not just a job or paycheck. It involves passion and total commitment beyond the norm, not just adherence to traditional roles or traditional schedules. Administrators should consider engaging in self-reflection, not only about their practice, but also about life experiences that drive their beliefs. Self-reflection has helped me make sense of my leadership and in many ways, has provided inner peace and reconciliation with my past. Other recommendations for practice follow.

### **Overarching Themes**

Emerging from the salient topics are three overarching themes, namely institutionalizing change, evoking the past to inspire the future, and the complexities of lifting up the disadvantaged. Pervasive in this study were my attempts to make lasting reforms, the influences of my past on decision-making and the challenges of working with a high needs population.

#### **Leaving a legacy: Institutionalizing change**

I have stated my aim to leave a legacy in terms of my work involving social capital. Not a legacy of my individual leadership, but an endowment of an enduring system where all agents have internalized and sustained this belief and practice to benefit students. To this end, this autoethnography cites examples of how we have worked to institutionalize changes supportive of this philosophy. Systemic and lasting change will ultimately be realized through people and policy.

This transformation begins and ends with people. As chronicled, I began the change with my individual actions as an agent of social capital. With the superintendent serving as a role model, others have followed the example, such as cabinet members supporting individual students and principals embracing the philosophy.

Beyond demonstrating the importance of being agents of social capital by example, we have provided training to district personnel on this concept. A designated administrator works with staff to convey the principles and best practices of this form of leadership to staff. This individual is well rounded with a depth of experience at the campus and district levels and has a passion for connecting with students. This administrator is a kindred spirit in respect to our shared work in connecting students to resources and support systems. I found it helpful to have a close companion on this journey.

In respect to those people who do not accept these beliefs, as noted in various sections of this autoethnography, we have taken personnel actions to build a team that will fully support students. In these cases, there was not an overt, specific rejection of the social capital approach. Rather, there was strong evidence that these individuals rejected some of the fundamental correlates of being a leader in this realm. For instance, as discussed, there was a principal who rarely listened to student voices and others that rejected policies that were student-centered, equitable, research-based, and fair.

I will ultimately leave the district at some juncture. Inevitably, others who have been part of this altruistic movement will also depart. Therefore, there must be a mechanism to sustain changes beyond current agents. Policy works to memorialize our reforms. My story includes a number of examples of policy revision and enforcement in response to issues that adversely

impacted students, such as ensuring compliance with retention guidelines, implementing less restrictive parking rules and expanding principal interview committees to include students.

It is my hope that these regulations will live far beyond my tenure in the system as a means of institutionalizing change. There is no guarantee that future leaders, perhaps with different visions, will embrace the same views; they may indeed amend policy to be consistent with their own perspectives and priorities. However, with this qualification, I am at peace knowing that written direction and authority promulgated in policy will be left to successors to carry on our mission, if they choose.

I stated under a previous heading that agents of social capital must embrace research to inform policy and practice. While it is true that all superintendents, traditional and unorthodox, should commit to this ideal, it is especially important for agents of social capital to firmly embrace this practice. We are on a passionate quest to improve the lives of students, particularly those who lack social capital. In a world where public policy often emerges from political expediency and from the powerful that are not always proponents of breaking the vicious cycle of poverty at their expense, it becomes essential for agents to use research to inform and support the passage of policy that promotes equity.

### **A leader evokes the past to inspire the future**

All leaders are shaped to a certain degree by their past experiences. Their individual histories may work to limit vision or they may prompt positive change through advocacy. Even negative memories can elicit goodness. I have been driven to make students' lives better because I suffered so much during my formative years and, at the same time, have been inspired by individuals who touched my life in positive ways in the midst of turmoil.

My grandmother was my first and most profound teacher. She guided my path towards service and stewardship. My grandmother instilled a sense of altruism in me from an early age. These compelling lessons informed by philosophy of leadership and shepherded me towards becoming an agent of social capital. I am sure she did not know it at the time, but her words would return in the form of positive action to better the lives of many students who reside in the United States, just across the border from her mother country.

School leaders, faculty and coaches also impacted my leadership beliefs. Even though I was an English language learner, poor and had academic gaps, a number of significant educators valued my presence and believed in my potential. I frequently remembered these individuals when making decisions regarding the students I served. Memories of their compassion fueled my efforts to end student retention as a common practice, drove my actions to relocate the alternative school, and prompted my upgrading of high school graduations. There are numerous other examples of how they influenced my practice. I found that leadership philosophy is not only formed by favorable past interactions, but it is also shaped by negative experiences.

My father was the major disappointment of my life, to say the least. His words were hurtful, the absence of his love was painful and he lacked any belief in my value or potential. However, ultimately, out of his darkness came light and emerging from his cruelty came goodness, which was all manifested in a future superintendent, his son. When I spoke to distressed students, I saw me. When I listened to their problems, they were mine. When I learned of a troubled student who lacked a father or who had an absent father, it was my father. By the way, my father and I have since reconciled and communicate on a regular basis. The relationship is good and he is proud of my achievements, yet I still carry the unfortunate memories of the

past. It is my hope that similarly situated students can find this same peace with their fathers in the future.

Initiatives to identify and intervene in the lives of fatherless students were inspired by my experience, such as our expansion of the FAFSA assistance program to provide alternative times for guidance. Providing additional encouragement and support for students in danger of not graduating was also motivated by recollections of the past. Having counselors proactively identify and intervene in the lives of students without fathers was additionally inspired by my own experience.

Finally, the church and members of the congregation greatly influenced my work as an agent of social capital. I recalled how a particular church family embraced me when I was at a stressful time in my young adult life. I was taught to practice the Golden Rule and to keep others foremost in mind, a message that reinforced my grandmother's earlier lessons. Equipped with the positive influences of the church and others in my life, I set out to change the lives of students for the better, but quickly found that a similar background and inspirational messages did not guarantee I would succeed. Addressing the great needs of my student population required navigating a complex system with competing priorities, false assumptions and funding challenges

### **Complexities of lifting up the disadvantaged**

As chronicled in this ethnography, my initial attempts to hear students' voices were not met with great enthusiasm. My similar background and ethnicity did not ensure acceptance. My title and authority did not matter. I had to earn their trust over time through attentive listening, following up on their concerns and by telling my own story. Gradually, students started to

connect with me as I learned to better interact with them. I then proceeded to make changes based, in part, on their concerns.

Resistance from staff, including subversive activities to undermine changes, further complicated the process of connecting with students. Non-compliance with the retention policy, resistance to some of the campus improvement projects and opposition to the relocation of the alternative school all stand as examples. These reforms were intended to improve educational opportunities for students, particularly for the underprivileged, yet certain members of my own team hindered efforts.

This complexity is not unlike a captain of a ship trying to navigate stormy seas without the full support of the crew. It is difficult enough to maneuver a vessel to a calm shore with all hands-on deck cooperating in the effort, but seemingly impossible, at times, when individuals act in defiance. I felt that I had a firm grasp of the helm and was confident of our course; however, I lacked the necessary supporting cast, especially in the early stages of my tenure. Through frequent meetings, personnel action and training, we eventually unified the crew towards a common destination – providing quality education for all learners, regardless of their backgrounds.

Weak assumptions also worked to impede our aims. “Students will be fine because they have strong support structures at home, particularly those from Hispanic households.” Through my conversations with students, experiences, and observations, I found that the above assertion is an unfounded generalization. Many of our students lacked comfort and encouragement from their families. They often stood alone in this world. As stated earlier, we deployed initiatives to support students in the place of their parents. Again, according to Stanton-Salazar (2011), social

capital “consist(s) of resources and key forms of social support embedded in one’s network or associations, and accessible through direct or indirect ties with institutional agents” (p. 1067).

My team and I were the institutional agents who passionately connected students to “resources and key forms of social support” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1067). Examples included offering support services for students with drug problems in partnership with an outside entity, collaborating with UTEP to more effectively guide students to college, providing computers and Wi-Fi for all students, facilitating alternative ways to learn about the FASFA for students who were working to support their families, to name a few.

My story also includes discussions about finance challenges, such as the lawsuit alleging funding inequity within the district, the need for a bond issue to replace, repair and build new facilities, and the need for prudent management of limited funds. School systems like mine have historically been underfunded by the state due to heavy reliance on property taxes. Since my district is relatively poor in terms of property, the yield from our tax assessment is limited.

Exacerbating the challenges associated with maintaining a sufficient level of funding to offer quality educational programs is the fact that most of our students are from economically disadvantaged homes, creating the unfortunate convergence of two adverse factors. Therefore, the process of securing adequate levels of revenues from local, state and federal funding sources while maintaining equity within the district can be complex. At the same time, we are challenged to fill the gaps for students coming to us from disadvantaged homes.

### **List of Major Findings Aligned to Research Questions**

Major findings are presented below. They are aligned to the three research questions in a list format. This section is intended to give the reader a quick and concise view of the findings, which have been drawn from discussion text.

**Research Question 1:** What experiences have influenced my role as a superintendent who views himself as an agent of social capital for all students in general and low-socioeconomic, minority students in particular?

**Research question 1: Findings**

- My grandmother instilled a great sense of service in me.
- My church and its members set me on an altruistic path, emphasizing that the Golden Rule must be practiced.
- As a substitute teacher, I witnessed the suffering and anguish of a group of retained first graders. This experience coupled with my knowledge of research on the subject inspired a strong conviction against the practice of student retention.
- Reflections of my own upbringing in which my father was absent much of the time, resources were scarce and I depended on external support systems to thrive, fuel my passion to fill gaps left by absence parents.
- A predominate feeling of anger, particularly with my father, emanated from my past when I witnessed the situations and circumstances of my students, who have similar backgrounds.
- I channeled my anger in productive ways to make positive differences in the lives of the students.

**Research Question 2:** What are the key practices, beliefs, and complexities for me as a superintendent striving to become an agent of social capital for students?

**Research question 2: Findings**

- My practice was to engage with students in an effort to involve them in critical conversations with the aim of helping them.

- My belief was this initiative would give students an important voice in the decision-making process.
- Direct engagement with students was a complex process of slowly earning trust while mitigating the concerns of skeptical staff members.
- The process of engaging and helping students can be complex because those with the greatest needs are often the most difficult to reach.
- Students and parents have the mindset that they are “bothering the superintendent with their concerns,” which adds to the complexity.
- My belief is that I should treat students as I do my own children.
- I view the prudent management of district assets as highly important as it pertains to being an effective agent of social capital.
- My practice was to mobilize the resources of the district with a shared purpose of benefiting students, particularly the most vulnerable.
- It was my belief that my isolated decision-making did not promote lasting and systemic change in the district; team work is the ideal.
- I employed the practices of modeling, training, and other strategies to encourage staff throughout the school system to embrace and act upon this concept.
- It was my belief that my actions as an agent of social capital did not circumvent the chain of command.
- I did not believe retaining students was an efficacious practice.
- We deployed alternative measures and practices to address academic deficiencies.

- The fact that retention has a particularly harmful impact on the most vulnerable students, my students, further strengthens this passionate belief.
- I fervently believed that housing students in deplorable facilities was unacceptable.
- Matters, such as the relocation of the alternative school and elimination of the retention policy, are complex and require thoughtful deliberation prior to action.
- I believe, based on my experiences, not all Hispanic households provide adequate support structures for children.
- My practice is to assume the place of the parents, when required, to assist students in need.
- I believe that educators must foster opportunities for these students to experience the world beyond their relatively isolated neighborhoods.
- My practice has been to extend technological resources to students' homes and to facilitate learning experiences in the wider world.
- It was my belief that the school is obligated to seek out students who do not have access to FASFA presentations because of family obligations and find alternative ways to serve them.
- I believe agility is important as it applies to agents of social capital. They must be willing to depart quickly from their schedules in the service of students.
- I believe many spiritual lessons are congruent with the philosophy of social capital.

**Research Question 3:** What insights can other superintendents gain from this study?

**Research question 3: Findings**

- While commonalities between the agent and students could potentially foster communication, they do not engender immediate trust.
- The superintendent's title and authority do not automatically create support.
- Role modeling, training and selective recruitment of like-minded leaders build capacity over time.
- Superintendents must take steps to earn students' trust over time by removing obstacles to communication.
- Creating a comfort zone through the agent's words and deeds is essential in fostering meaningful conversations.
- Superintendents should be aware of the possible adverse effects of district policies, particularly negative impacts on minority and economically disadvantaged students.
- Prior to adopting a new policy, an impact analysis may be in order and periodic review of existing policy could be beneficial.
- Superintendents often have to navigate and mitigate competing beliefs when enacting new policy or amending existing rules.
- Research should inform policy and practice, particularly as it pertains to the adverse effects on minority and economically disadvantaged populations.

- Administrators interested in this realm of advocacy should stand prepared to embrace the role of the parents to help students maneuver through the complexities of this world.
- Superintendents should consider a moral responsibility to provide district resources, such as computers, Wi-Fi, and learning opportunities outside the district, to level the educational playing field.
- School leaders should be aware of ceremonial functions that can inspire students to graduate and attend college.
- If educational leaders want to serve the best interests of students, particularly those with the greatest needs, they should use proactive approaches to ensure inclusivity and promote success.
- Being an agent of social capital involves passion and total commitment beyond the norm, not just adherence to traditional roles or traditional schedules.
- Administrators should consider engaging in self-reflection, not only about their practice, but also about life experiences that drive their beliefs.
- Superintendents, or those aspiring to the position, should assess the demographic characteristics and needs of the school system before embarking on this path.
- Leaders who contemplate this path should recognize that it might be a difficult and messy journey, one fraught with obstacles, barriers, and challenges.
- If superintendents do decide to become agents of social capital, they should discuss this course with trustees.

## **Implications for Practice and Recommendations**

The implication for practice derived from this study concerns the role of the superintendent as an institutional agent of social capital for all students and the most vulnerable youth in particular. This study reveals my experiences in embracing this role, from which several recommendations emerge, which are responsive to Research Question Three, regarding useful information for administrators.

Superintendents may be reluctant to leave the “comfort zone” of the central office. After all, this is where chief executives have traditionally executed their duties and there are others in the district who can better act as agents of social capital, such as teachers, counselors, and principals. Historically, these positions have assumed this role due to their natural proximity to students. However, this study informs us that there are others in the organization that can serve in this capacity. Superintendents who embrace the traditional approach to the superintendency should at least consider alternative forms of leadership, including becoming an agent of social capital. However, transformations of this nature are not easy.

Leaders who contemplate this path should recognize that it might be a difficult and messy journey, one fraught with obstacles, barriers, and challenges. My narrative describes confrontations with administrators, community members and others opposed to my initiatives and positions on district policy. My leadership story includes experiences dealing with painful student and parent issues. I was not isolated in some faraway office; these were real problems involving real people. No longer insulated from the fray by principals and assistant superintendents, I was directly exposed and vulnerable. However, in retrospect, the fruits of my efforts far exceeded the negatives, especially as my work pertained to the neediest students.

Superintendents, or those aspiring to the position, should assess the demographic characteristics and needs of the school system before embarking on this path. In my case, I found high numbers of minority and economically disadvantaged students; young people who could especially benefit from my presence as an agent of social capital. Historically, these students have lacked resources and networks that promote upward mobility, perpetuating a vicious cycle of poverty.

Superintendents as “moral steward[s]” (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2005, p. 199) can use their platforms to directly engage with students, hear their voice, and act to abrogate school structures that preclude them from “accessing key forms of social and institutional support” (Stanton-Salazar, 2001, p. 212). In view of the needs of our students, I found it as a moral imperative that I engage in this fashion. Other assessments conducted by superintendents may yield different results in terms of decisions to take this course.

Full knowledge of job demands is essential for those who decide to transform their roles to agents of social capital. The superintendency is difficult enough, to say the least. Agents have to assume additional demands far beyond the norm. They must be in the field on a regular basis engaging with students and parents while effectively managing all the affairs of the district at the same time. For me, it demanded a total commitment to the wellbeing of students above my personal, financial, and contractual interests.

This form of leadership requires a high level of personal commitment coupled with a strong supporting administrative structure, namely competent central office department heads. These talented leaders do in fact manage their divisions, such as finance, instruction, human resources, and operations, with distinction, which provided me with the time and comfort zone to

engage at the campuses. Administrators contemplating this calling should have a strong supporting cast in place.

I also enjoyed the support of the Board of Trustees. As stated in an earlier section, it has extended my contract every year and has offered increases in pay, some of which I rejected in view of vital district needs. My performance evaluations are good. However, if superintendents do decide to become agents of social capital, they should discuss this course with trustees. I am fortunate to have a supportive board that in general terms approved of my interaction with students and parents. However, there may be circumstances in which trustees might object to this approach.

A seasoned superintendent who reads these recommendations for practice may observe, “Knowing what I know about the job, how does he effectively perform his duties? How can he possibly establish a vision for the district? Being in the schools all day, he probably can’t see the forest for the trees!” My response would be simple. “There would be no forest without the trees.” Our students are the majestic trees that grow in the forest we call a school district. I view my role as a nurturer of the trees and I am perfectly capable of beholding the beautiful forest at the same time.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

Studies of the superintendency brilliantly describe the multifarious roles, challenges, and expectations of the superintendent. “There are as many varied journeys to the superintendency as there are superintendents” (Wagner, 2010, p. 1). What it means to be superintendent varies from district to district, state to state, and sometimes even from board member to board member (Wagner, 2010). Thus, superintendents may view their roles in a variety of ways depending on their personal or professional experiences. Autoethnographies provide an insider voice and a

different perspective, which may contribute greatly to the understanding of the role of the superintendent. Additional autoethnographical studies may provide other perspectives and experiences to augment the knowledge base.

This study, conducted in a district situated on the US-Mexico border with high numbers of minority and economically disadvantaged students, yielded many findings, which may be unique to the research location and student demographics. It might be useful to conduct autoethnographies on this subject in other areas of the country. For instance, a study involving an inner-city superintendent with an ethnically diverse student population may offer different findings.

Research employing other methods may be informative. For example, quantitative or mixed methods approaches could capture the views of subjects on the concept of agents of social capital in the schools. The opinions of current superintendents regarding this topic collected through surveys would be beneficial to discourse. Gathering the views of other stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, and principals, through quantitative or other techniques would further inform the knowledge base.

Institutions of higher education offering superintendent preparation courses and doctoral programs in educational leadership could use this research as a case study to prompt further discussion and thought on agents of social capital in the schools. Class discussions may stimulate interest in this topic and, perhaps, inspire additional dissertations on the subject.

### **Final Reflections**

As a new superintendent, I was seeking more than standards and theories to understand my role. Informed by my life story, I decided from the onset to challenge traditional expectations by becoming an agent of social capital for students. It was not easy. There were many sleepless

nights, gazing into the darkness, reflecting and meditating. I had to find ways to help students. Driven to create an environment in the district where all adults embraced the same vision, I took my first steps on what was to become a profound journey. It still is one.

In view of this autoethnography, I invite the readers to put themselves in my place. In the process, I hope to inspire, at the very least, a conversation on the meaning and importance of social capital for students. I invite readers to reflect on their own practice. As for me, I will continue sharing my life story with my students, finding ways to help them, and advocating on their behalf.

In the final analysis, I realized that my story is not so much about me anymore; it is about students like Gabriela who, with tears in her eyes, just before her graduation, said to me:

“When I think of my life, the way things are now in my family, I think of the story you told us in class. Thank you for sharing it with us. When I feel discouraged, I think of you, and I am inspired to one day accomplish something meaningful in my life, just as you have.”

Students should not be the forgotten stakeholders with no voice. They are precious souls deserving of dignity and respect, not obscure funding sources, nameless statistics, or worse yet, faceless producers of test scores. This recognition of the worth of students drives my perception of my role; there is no power in being a superintendent, it is only a powerful way to serve others, and more importantly, to serve the students who need us most.

## References

- American Association of School Administrators. (1993). Professional Standards for the Superintendency. 2016, from [http://www.geneonet.com/MRSD/AASA\\_Superintendent\\_professional\\_standards.htm](http://www.geneonet.com/MRSD/AASA_Superintendent_professional_standards.htm)
- Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 373-395.
- Anderson, L. (2010). Analytic Autoethnography. In P. Atkinson & S. Delamont (Eds.), *Sage Qualitative Research Methods* (Vol. IV, pp. 297-318). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9780857028211>
- Ansary, T. (2007). *Education at risk: Fallout from a flawed report*. Retrieved from Edutopia: The George Lucas Educational Foundation Website: <https://www.edutopia.org/landmark-education-report-nation-risk>
- Austin, M. (2013). In Jeanne Brandon C. A. (Ed.), *Celebrate life's lessons*. Bloomington, IN: Balboa Press.
- Bae, J. (2015). The impact of social capital on men's mental health from the perspective of social support theory. *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, 24(1), 65-77. doi:10.1111/ijjs.12034
- Barker, K. L., Burdick, D., & Burdick, D. W. (1993). *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Bible Publishers.
- Behar, R. (1996). *The vulnerable observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Björk, L. G., & Lindle, J. C. (2001). Superintendent and interest groups. *Education Policy*, 15(1), 76-91. Corwin Press, Inc.
- Björk, L. G., Browne-Ferrigno, T., & Kowalski, T. J. (2014). The superintendent and educational reform in the United States of America. *Leadership & Policy in Schools*, 13(4), 444-465. doi:10.1080/15700763.2014.945656
- Björk, L. G., Kowalski, T. J., & Browne-Ferrigno, T. (2005). Learning theory and research. In L. G. Björk, & T. J. Kowalski (Eds.), *The contemporary superintendent: Preparation, practice, and development* (pp. 19-26). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. Retrieved from <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip057/2005003265.html>
- Björk, L. G., Glass, T. E., & Brunner, C. C. (2005). Characteristics of American school superintendents. In L. G. Björk, & T. J. Kowalski (Eds.), *The contemporary superintendent: Preparation, practice, and development* (pp. 19-26). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

- Björk, L. G., & Gurley, D. K. (2005). Superintendent as educational statesman and political strategist. In L. G. Björk, & T. J. Kowalski (Eds.), *The contemporary superintendent: Preparation, practice, and development* (pp. 19-26). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Bochner, A. P. (2001). Narrative's virtues. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7(2), 131-157.
- Bochner, A. P. (2012). On first-person narrative scholarship: Autoethnography as acts of meaning. *Narrative Inquiry*, 22(1), 155-164. doi:10.1075/ni.22.1.10boc
- Booth, A., Scott, M. E., & King, V. (2010). Father residence and adolescent problem behavior: Are youth always better off in two-parent families? *Journal of Family Issues*, 31(5), 585-605.
- Bourdieu, P. (1973). Cultural reproduction and social reproduction. In R. Brown (Ed.), *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change* (pp. 71-112). London: Tavistock.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (pp. 241-256). New York, NY: Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Boyland, L., & Ellis, J. (2015). Superintendent retirement in a reform state: Rhetoric and reality. *AASA Journal of Scholarship & Practice*, 11(4), 21-38.
- Brändle, T., & Häuberer, J. (2015). Social capital of non-traditional students at a German university. do traditional and non-traditional students access different social resources? *International Journal of Higher Education*, 4(1), 92-105. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1697486541?accountid=7121>
- Briggs, X. d. S. (1998). Brown kids in white suburbs: Housing mobility and the many faces of social capital. *Housing Policy Debate*, 9(1), 177-221.
- Brown, T. F., Swenson, S. H., & Hertz, K. V. (2007). Identifying the relative strength of Glasser's five basic needs in school superintendents. *AASA Journal of Scholarship and Practice*, 3(4), 5-13.
- Browne-Ferrigno, T., & Glass, T. E. (2005). Superintendent as Organizational Manager. In L. G. Bjork & T. J. Kowalski (Eds.), *The Contemporary Superintendent: Preparation, Practice, and Development* (pp. 137-162). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Bunch, M. K. (2016). *Whiteness in public school administration: A critical narrative approach to understanding how insider superintendents communicate with their administrative staff members*. (Ed.D.), University of the Pacific, Ann Arbor, MI. Retrieved from ProQuest and Theses (1776177213) <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1776177213?accountid=7121> (10044702)

- Bunch, M. K. (2016). *Whiteness in public school administration: A critical narrative approach to understanding how insider superintendents communicate with their administrative staff members* (Ed.D.). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1776177213). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1776177213?accountid=7121>
- Callahan, R. E. (1964). *Education and the cult of efficiency: study of the social forces that have shaped the administration of the public schools*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Callahan, R. E. (1966). *The Superintendent of Schools: A Historical Analysis*. Washington, DC: Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED010410.pdf>
- Canole, M., & Young, M. (2013). *Standards for educational leaders: An analysis*. Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers. Retrieved from <http://www.ccsso.org/Documents/Analysis%20of%20Leadership%20Standards-Final-070913-RGB.pdf>
- Carolan-Silva, A., & Reyes, J. R. (2013). Navigating the path to college: Latino students' social networks and access to college. *Educational Studies*, 49(4), 334-359. doi:10.1080/00131946.2013.808199
- Carter, G. R., & Cunningham, W. G. (1997). *The American school superintendent: Leading in an age of pressure* (1st ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Chang, H. (2008). *Autoethnography as method: Developing qualitative inquiry*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Chang, H. (2007). *Autoethnography as method: Raising cultural consciousness of self and others*. Walnut Creek, CA.
- Chingos, M. M., Whitehurst, G. J. R., & Lindquist, K. M. (2014). *School superintendents: Vital or irrelevant?* Washington, DC: Brown Center on Education Policy at Brookings. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/SuperintendentsBrown-Center9314.pdf>
- Coffey, A. (1999). *The ethnographic self fieldwork and the representation of identity*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94(Supplement: Organizations and Institutions: Sociological and Economic Approaches to the Analysis of Social Structure), S95-S120. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2780243>
- Comanor, W. S., & Phillips, L. (2002). The impact of income and family structure on delinquency. *Journal of Applied Economics*, 5(2), 209-232.

- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher, 19*(5), 2-14.
- Cook, P. S. (2014). 'To actually be sociological': Autoethnography as an assessment and learning tool. *Journal of Sociology, 50*(3), 269-282. doi:10.1177/1440783312451780
- Cooper, B. S., & Fusarelli, L. D. (2002). *The promises and perils facing today's school superintendent*. Lanham, MD.: Scarecrow Education/Scarecrow Press.
- Council of Chief State School Officers. (1996). Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium: Standards for School Leaders. Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson, Education, Inc.
- Cuban, L. (1976). The urban school superintendency: A century and a half of change. Fastback Series, No. 77. Bicentennial Series. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED120912.pdf>
- Curry, M. C. (2016). *Role and responsibility priorities of the superintendent/principal as perceived by board presidents, teachers' union presidents, and superintendent/principals* (Ed.D.). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. (1860892779).
- Dailey, A. J. (2011). An autoethnography of a first-time school district superintendent: Complicated by issues of race, gender and persistent fiscal stress. Available from ProQuest Dissertations and theses. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/892712966>
- Dauphinee, E. (2010). The ethics of autoethnography. *Review of International Studies, 36*(3), 799-818. doi:10.1017/S0260210510000690
- Davies, C. A. (2008). *Reflexive ethnography: A guide to researching selves and others*. Milton Park, UK: Routledge.
- Delamont, S. (2009). The only honest thing: Autoethnography, reflexivity and small crises in fieldwork. *Ethnography and Education, 4*(1), 51-63.
- Delgado-Gaitan, C. (2001). *The power of community: Mobilizing for family and schooling*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Denzin, N. K. (2006). Analytic autoethnography, or déjà vu all over again. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 35*(4), 419-428.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. (2005). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

- Dika, S. L., & Singh, K. (2002). Applications of social capital in educational literature: A critical synthesis. *Review of Educational Research*, 72(1), 31-60.
- Ellis, C. S. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.
- Ellis, C. S., & Bochner, A. P. (2016). Analyzing analytical autoethnography: An autopsy. *Journal of contemporary ethnography*, 35(4), 429-449. doi: 10.1177/0891241606286979.
- Ellis, C. S. (2007). Telling secrets, revealing lives relational ethics in research with intimate others. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13(1), 3-29. doi: 10.1177/1077800406294947.
- Ellis, C. S. (2009). *Revision: Autoethnographic reflections on life and work*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc.
- Ellis, C. S. (2012). Autoethnography. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (Vol. 1, pp. 48-51). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Ellis, C. S., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, 36(4), 273-290. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23032294>
- Ellis, C. S., & Bochner, A. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as Subject. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., pp. 733-768). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Ellison, N. B., Wohn, D. Y., & Greenhow, C. M. (2014). Adolescents' visions of their future careers, educational plans, and life pathways the role of bridging and bonding social capital experiences. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 31(4), 516-534.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Farr, J. (2004). Social capital a conceptual history. *Political Theory*, 32(1), 6-33.
- Finnan, L., Mccord, R., Stream, C., Mattocks, T., Petersen, G., & Ellerson, N. (2015). *Study of the American superintendent 2015 mid-decade update*. American Association of School Administrators.
- Fripp, P. (n.d.). *A team is more than a group of people*. Retrieved from <http://www.fripp.com/a-team-is-more-than-a-group-of-people/>
- Fullan, M., & Stiegelbauer, S., (1991). *The new meaning of educational change*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

- Fuller, H. L., Campbell, C., Celio, M. B., Harvey, J., Immerwahr, J., & Winger, A. (2003 July). An impossible job? The view from the urban superintendent's Chair. Seattle, WA: The Wallace Foundation. Retrieved from [https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/pub\\_crpe\\_imposs\\_jul03\\_0.pdf](https://www.crpe.org/sites/default/files/pub_crpe_imposs_jul03_0.pdf)
- Furman, R. (2015). Autoethnographic explorations of researching older expatriate men: Magnifying emotion using the research pantoum. *Creative Approaches to Research*, 8(3), 102-114.
- Fusarelli, B.C., & Fusarelli, L.D.. (2005). Reconceptualizing the superintendency: Superintendents as applied social scientists and social activists. In L. G. Bjork & T. J. Kowalski (Eds.), *The Contemporary Superintendent: Preparation, Practice, and Development* (pp. 187-206). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Garratt, D., & Hodkinson, P. (1998). Can there be criteria for selecting research criteria?—A hermeneutical analysis of an inescapable dilemma. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 4(4), 515-539.
- Garza Jr., E. (2008). Autoethnography of a first-time superintendent: Challenges to leadership for social justice. *Journal of Latinos & Education*, 7(2), 163-176. doi:10.1080/15348430701828749
- Gergen, M., & Gergen, K. (2002). Ethnographic representation as relationship. In A. P. Bochner and C. Ellis (Eds.), *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics* (pp.11-33). Walnut Creek, CA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Glass, T. E., & Franceschini, L. A. (2007). The state of the american school superintendency: A mid-decade study. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Gonzalez, J. (2013). Understanding the role of social capital and school structure on latino academic success. *LUX: A Journal of Transdisciplinary Writing and Research from Claremont Graduate University*, 2(1), 16.
- Gonzalez, K., Stoner, C., & Jovel, J. E. (2003). Examining the role of social capital in access to college for latinas: Toward a college opportunity framework. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, 2(2), 146-170.
- Graham, R. J. (1989). Autobiography and education. *The Journal of Educational Thought (JET)/Revue De La Pensée Educative*, 23(2), 92-105.
- Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Grenfell, M. (2009). Applying Bourdieu's field theory: The case of social capital and education. *Education, Knowledge & Economy: A Journal for Education and Social Enterprise*, 3(1), 17-34. Retrieved from <http://www.informaworld.com/openurl?genre=article&id=doi:10.1080/17496890902786812>

- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation* Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Hamdan, A. (2012). Autoethnography as a genre of qualitative research: A journey inside out. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 11*(5), 585-606.
- Harper, C. C., & McLanahan, S. S. (2004). Father absence and youth incarceration. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 14*(3), 369-397.
- Harper, R. (2001). Social capital: A review of the literature. *Social Analysis and Reporting Division, Office for National Statistics*. Retrieved from: <https://www.researchgate.net/file.PostFileLoader.html?id...assetKey...>
- Hawk, N., & Martin, B. (2011). Understanding and reducing stress in the superintendency. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 39*(3), 364-390.
- Hayano, D. (1979). Auto-ethnography: Paradigms, problems, and prospects. *Human Organization, 38*(1), 99-104.
- Hinojosa, A. (2013, July 20). Clint ISD trustees pick chief. *El Paso Times*, pp. 2A.
- Hokkanen, S. (2017). Analyzing personal embodied experiences: Autoethnography, feelings, and fieldwork. *Translation & Interpreting, 9*(1), 24-35.
- Holt, N. L. (2003). Representation, legitimation, and autoethnography: An autoethnographic writing story. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 2*(1), 18-28.
- hooks, b. (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Horvat, E. M., Weininger, E. B., & Lareau, A. (2003). From social ties to social capital: Class differences in the relations between schools and parent networks. *American Educational Research Journal, 40*(2), 319-351.
- Houston, P. (2001). Superintendents for the 21st century: It's not just a job, it's a calling. *Phi Delta Kappan, 82*(6), 428-433.
- Howlett, P. (1993). The politics of school leaders, past and future. *Education Digest, 58*(9), 18-21.
- Hoyle, J. R. (1988). The 21st century superintendent: A great motivator. Paper presented at the *Paul B. Salmon Memorial Lecture, American Association of School Administrators Convention, Las Vegas, Nevada*,

- Hoyle, J. R. (2005). *The superintendent as CEO: Standards-based performance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. Retrieved from <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0416/2004006350.html>
- Hughes, J. N., Kwok, O., & Im, M. H. (2013). Effect of retention in first grade on parents' educational expectations and children's academic outcomes. *American Educational Research Journal*, 50(6), 1336-1359.
- Johns, S. E. (2001). Using the Comer model to educate immigrant children. *Childhood Education*, 77(5), 268-274.
- Jones, L. B. (2001). *Jesus CEO: Using ancient wisdom for visionary leadership*. New York, NY: Hyperion Press.
- Jones, S. H. (2002). Autoethnography: Making the personal political. In N. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed. pp. 763-791). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Kena, G., et al. (2016). *The condition of education 2016*. (No. (NCES 2016-144)). Washington DC.: U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Kowalski, T. J. (1995). *Keepers of the flame: Contemporary urban superintendents* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Kowalski, T. J. (1999). *The school superintendent: Theory, practice, and cases*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill, Prentice Hall.
- Kowalski, T. J. (2001). The future of local school governance: Implications for board members and superintendents. In C. C. Brunner & L. G. Bjork (Eds.), *The New Superintendency* (Vol. 6, pp. 183-201). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited
- Kowalski, T. J. (2005a). Evolution of the school district superintendent position. In L. Björk and T. J. Kowalski (Eds.), *The Contemporary Superintendent: Preparation, Practice, and Development*, 1-18. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Kowalski, T. J. (2005b). Evolution of the school superintendent as communicator. *Communication Education*, 54(2), 101-117.
- Kowalski, T. J. (2011). *The American school superintendent: 2010 decennial study*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Lang, K., & Zagorsky, J. L. (2001). Does growing up with a parent absent really hurt? *Journal of Human Resources*, 253-273.
- Laslett, B. (1999). *Personal narratives as sociology*. *Contemporary Sociology*. 28 (4). 391-401.

- Leithwood, K. A., Farquhar, R. H., & Boich, J. W. (1989) The Canadian school superintendent. *Symposium series 19 (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education)*. Toronto, ON: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- Leithwood, K. A., & Riehl, C. (2003). *What we know about successful school leadership*. Nottingham, UK: National College for School Leadership.
- Leithwood, K. (1995). Introduction: Transforming politics into education. In K. Leithwood (Ed.), *Effective school district leadership: Transforming politics into education* (pp. 1-14). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Lopez, E. S. (1996). *Social Capital and the Educational Performance of Latino and Non-Latino Youth. ISRI Research Report No. 11 [microform] / Elias S. Lopez*. [Washington D.C.]: Distributed by ERIC Clearinghouse.
- Lopez, V., & Corona, R. (2012). Troubled relationships: High-risk Latina adolescents and nonresident fathers. *Journal of Family Issues*, 33(6), 715-744.
- Marks, H. M. (2000). Student engagement in instructional activity: Patterns in the elementary, middle, and high school years. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(1), pp. 153-184.
- Matsueda, R. L., & Heimer, K. (1987). Race, family structure, and delinquency: A test of differential association and social control theories. *American Sociological Review*, , 826-840.
- Maxwell, L. A. (2014). U.S. school enrollment hits majority-minority milestone. *Education Digest*, 80(4), 27-33.
- Mayo, R. (1999). From outside in: Additional conflict for the public school superintendent. voices from practitioners. *Journal of School Leadership*, 9(2), 160-79.
- Mellon, E. (2013). HISD principal resigns after report ties to cheating scandal. *Houston Chronicle*. Retrieved from <http://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/HISD-principal-resigns-after-report-ties-him-to-4733733.php>
- Menning, C. L. (2006). Nonresident fathering and school failure. *Journal of Family Issues*, 27(10), 1356-1382.
- Mills, C. W. (2000). *The sociological imagination* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Molnar, G., & Purdy, L. (eds) (2015). *Ethnographies in sport and exercise research*. London: Routledge.
- Morris, J. A., Brotheridge, C. M., & Urbanski, J. C. (2005). Bringing humility to leadership: Antecedents and consequences of leader humility. *Human Relations*, 58(10), 1323-1350.

- Muncey, T. (2010). *Creating autoethnographies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Muncey, T. (2005). Doing autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 4(1), 1-12.
- Murdock, T. B. (1999). The social context of risk: Status and motivational predictors of alienation in middle school. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 91(1), 62-75.  
doi:10.1037/0022-0663.91.1.62
- Murphy, J., & Hallinger, P. (1986). The superintendent as instructional leader: Findings from effective school districts. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 24(2), 213-36.
- Museus, S. D., & Neville, K. (2012). The role of institutional agents and social capital in the experiences of minority college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 53(3), 436-452
- Museus, S. D., & Ravello, J. N. (2010). Characteristics of academic advising that contribute to racial and ethnic minority student success at predominantly white institutions. *NACADA Journal*, 30(1), 47-58.
- Ngunjiri, F. W., Hernandez, K. C., & Chang, H. (2010). Living autoethnography: Connecting life and research. *Journal of Research Practice*, 6(1), 1-17.
- Nuciforo, C. A. (2015). Factors supporting implementation of executive coaching as embedded professional learning for superintendents in New York State (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. (No. 10009838)
- Norton, M. S. (1996). *The school superintendency: New responsibilities, new leadership*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Odekirk, K. A. (2010). *Lightning in a jar: An autoethnographic study of a female superintendent's quest to become a social justice leader* (Ph.D.). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses. (851315348).
- Pace, S. (2012). Writing the self into research: Using grounded theory analytic strategies in autoethnography. *TEXT Special Issue Website Series*, 13(April 2012), 1-15.
- Pelias, R. J. (2003). The academic tourist: An autoethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9(3), 369-373.
- Peterson, G. J., & Barnett, B. G. (2005). The superintendent as instructional leader: Current practice, future conceptualizations, and implications for preparation. In L. G. Bjork & T. J. Kowalski (Eds.), *The Contemporary Superintendent: Preparation, Practice, and Development* (pp. 107-136). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

- Philaretou, A. G., & Allen, K. R. (2005). Researching sensitive topics through autoethnographic means. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 14(1), 65-78.
- Portes, A. (1998). Social Capital: Its origins and applications in modern sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24, 1-24.
- Potter, L. B., & Hoque, N. (2013). Texas population projections, 2010-2050. Austin, TX: *Office of the State Demographer*.
- Putnam, R. D. (2002). *Democracies in flux: The evolution of social capital in contemporary society*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Ream, R. K. (2003). Counterfeit social capital and Mexican-American underachievement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 25(3), 237-262.
- Reed-Danahay, D. (2009). Anthropologists, education, and autoethnography. *Reviews in Anthropology*, 38(1), 28-47. doi:10.1080/00938150802672931
- National Policy Board for Educational Administration. (2015). *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders 2015*. Reston, VA: National Policy Board for Educational Administration.
- Reynolds, A. J. (1992). Grade retention and school adjustment: An explanatory analysis. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 14(2), 101-121.
- Richardson, L. (2000). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln, (eds.) *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 923-948). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Roderick, M. (1994). Grade retention and school dropout: Investigating the association. *American Educational Research Journal*, 31(4), 729-759.
- Rose, N. (1990). *Governing the soul: The shaping of the private self*. Florence, KY: Taylor & Frances/Routledge.
- Rose III, S. (2011). *An autoethnography of a first-time school district superintendent: Experiences in governance, fiscal stress, and community relations*. (Ed.D.), University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/27s061fm#main>
- Rudge, T. (1996). (Re) writing ethnography: The unsettling questions for nursing research raised by post-structural approaches to 'the field'. *Nursing Inquiry*, 3(3), 146-152.

- Sabogal, F., Marín, G., Otero-Sabogal, R., Marín, B. V., & Perez-Stable, E. J. (1987). Hispanic familism and acculturation: What changes and what doesn't? *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 9(4), 397-412.
- Scheurich, J. J., & Skrla, L. (2003). *Leadership for equity and excellence: Creating high-achievement classrooms, schools, and districts*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Sharp, W. L., & Walter, J. K. (2004). *The school superintendent: The profession and the person* (2nd ed.). Lanham, MD: ScarecrowEducation.
- Shoji, M. N., Haskins, A. R., Rangel, D. E., & Sorensen, K. N. (2014). The emergence of social capital in low-income latino elementary schools. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 29(4), 600-613. doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2014.07.003
- Smith, L. M. (1994). Biographical method. In N. K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 286-305). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Sparkes, A. C. (2002). Autoethnography: Self-indulgence or something more? In A.P. Bochner & C. Ellis (Eds.), *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics* (pp. 209-232). Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.
- Spry, T. (2001). Performing autoethnography: An embodied methodological praxis. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7(6), 706-732.
- Stanley, L. (1993). On auto/biography in sociology. *Sociology*, 27(1), 41-52.
- Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (2001). *Manufacturing hope and despair: The school and kin support networks of US-Mexican youth*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (1997). A social capital framework for understanding the socialization of racial minority children and youth. *Harvard Educational Review*, 67(1), 1-40.
- Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (2011). A social capital framework for the study of institutional agents and their role in the empowerment of low-status students and youth. *Youth & Society*, 43(3), 1066-1109.
- Starr, L. J. (2010). The use of autoethnography in educational research: Locating who we are in what we do. *Cjnse/Rcjcé*, 3(1), 1-9.
- Stockard, J., & Mayberry, M. (1992). *Effective educational environments*. Newbury Park, CA: Corwin Press.
- Straubhaar, R. (2013). Student use of aspirational and linguistic social capital in an urban immigrant-centered english immersion high school. *The High School Journal*, 97(2), 92-106. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43281020>

- Tedlock, B. (2000). Ethnography and ethnographic representation. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp.455-486). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, part VII Chapter 242, (2014).
- Voelkl, K. E., & Frone, M. R. (2000). Predictors of substance use at school among high school students. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92(3), 583-592. doi:10.1037/0022-0663.92.3.583
- Vogell, H. (2011). Investigation into APS cheating finds unethical behavior across every level. *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, July 26. Retrieved July 2017 from <http://www.ajc.com/news/local/investigation-into-aps-cheating-finds-unethical-behavior-across-every-level/bX4bEZDWbeOH33cDkod1FL/>
- Vonèche, J. (2001). Identity and narrative in Piaget's autobiographies. In J. Brockmeier & D. Carbaugh (Eds.), *Narrative and identity studies in autobiography, self and culture* (pp. 219-245). Amsterdam, NL: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Vryan, K. D. (2006). Expanding analytic autoethnography and enhancing its potential. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35(4), 405-409.
- Wagner, L. K. (2010). *The savvy superintendent: Leading instruction to the top of the class*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.
- Wall, S. (2006). An autoethnography on learning about autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5(2), 1-12.
- Wall, S. (2008). Easier said than done: Writing an autoethnography. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 7(1), 38-53.
- White, E. G. H. (2002). *Messages to young people*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub Assoc.
- Wise, L. (2015). 2015 City, ISDs, & Community College Election. *El Paso County Elections*. 2016, from [http://results.enr.clarityelections.com/TX/El\\_Paso/54469/152904/Web01/en/summary.html#](http://results.enr.clarityelections.com/TX/El_Paso/54469/152904/Web01/en/summary.html#)
- Wolcott, H. F. (1994). *Transforming qualitative data: Description, analysis, and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Wolcott, H. F. (2004). The ethnographic autobiography. *Auto/Biography*, 12(2), 93-106.
- Woolcock, M. (1998). Social capital and economic development: Toward a theoretical synthesis and policy framework. *Theory and Society*, 27(2), 151-208.

- Woolcock, M., & Narayan, D. (2006). Social Capital: Implications for development theory, research, and policy revisited. In A. Bebbington, M. Woolcock, S. Gugenheim, & E. Olsen (Eds.) *The search for empowerment social capital as ideas and practice at the World Bank*, (pp. 3-62).
- Woolley, M. E. (2006). Advancing a positive school climate for students, families, and staff. In C. Franklin, M.B. Harris & P. Allen-Meares (Eds.) *A guide for school-based professionals* (pp. 777-784). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Woolley, M., & Bowen, G. (2007). In the context of risk: Supportive adults and the school engagement of middle school students. *Family Relations*, 56, 92-104
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69-91.
- Zubrzycki, J. (2012). Cheating scandal lands ex-superintendent in prison. *Education Week*, 32(8), 6-6.

## **Vitae**

Juan I. Martinez was born on February 2, 1968 in Magistral Del Oro, Durango, Mexico. He graduated from El Paso High School in El Paso, Texas in 1986. After graduation, he moved to California. Three years later he returned to El Paso to attend El Paso Community College and The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). As an undergraduate student in the College of Business, he received the distinction of Student of the Month by the university for his contribution to the community and for taking a leadership role in organizing and recruiting members of the Data Processing Management Association, an organization for computer information systems majors, as mentors and tutors for middle school students. He received a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration in 1993. After graduation, he enrolled in the College of Education to pursue a Masters of Education. While enrolled in the Master's program, he also worked towards obtaining a teaching certification in Bilingual Education. Since his graduation, he has served as elementary school teacher, assistant principal, principal, director of human resources, chief of human resources. In 2013, he enrolled in the doctoral program at the UTEP and soon after he was named superintendent of schools. He has served as superintendent for the past four years.

This dissertation was typed by Juan I. Martinez