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Chicanas' Experiences in an Educational Leadership Doctoral Program within the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Dedication

Dedico este trabajo a mi madre, Maria Blas Matus y padre, Florencio Carrera Delgado. Gracias a ustedes aprendí a no rendirme, a valorar los frutos del trabajo arduo, y afrontar obstáculos con la frente en alto. Gracias por su amor incondicional, por inculcarme el valor de la educación, y recordarme de dónde venimos y que aún nos falta mucho camino por recorrer.

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My heart knows I was never alone throughout this journey.

Mi corazón sabe que nunca estuve sola a lo largo de este camino.

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by

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to our society on a global scale. While the is literature that alludes to the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on Ed.D. students, women, and people of color, research focusing on Chicana or Mexican-American female scholar-practitioners is limited. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore, highlight, and add to the literature on the experiences of Chicana or Mexican-American female scholar-practitioners who were involved in any of the dissertation stages, such as capstone, dissertation research, or dissertation writing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This qualitative research employed a testimonio methodology guided by the Chicana feminist epistemology. The Chicana feminist epistemology allowed to highlight testimonialistas intersectionality of being a woman, a person of color, and a doctoral student during the pandemic. The findings of this study were organized into three themes that emerged from the data analysis: (1) navigating responsibilities, (2) support systems, and (3) sense of purpose. The first concept discusses how doctoral students negotiated multiple identities and roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second concept, support systems, alludes to the factors that helped testimonialistas complete their doctoral program. The last concept, sense of purpose, refers to the drive that guided participants' academic success.

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Chapter 1: Social Setting

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to our society on a global scale (Raj Kumar et al., 2022). Even though pandemics are not novel in human history (Raj Kumar et al., 2022), such as H1N1 swine flu, SARS, and Ebola viruses (Donohue et al., 2021; Weaver et al., 2023), this was the first time a pandemic, within a few months, became a worldwide crisis (Raj Kumar et al., 2022; Weaver et al., 2023). Consequently, in an effort to contain the spread of the virus, governments mandated the temporary closure of schools, businesses, daycares, and recreational venues (Shomotova et al., 2022). These lockdown measures posed significant challenges to our society by merging work, personal activities, and other responsibilities under the same roof (Caldarulo et al., 2022; Raj Kumar et al., 2022; Shomotova et al., 2022; Weaver et al., 2023). As lockdown measures were implemented, businesses and schools had to completely close or scale down operations, translating into almost 81% of the world's workforce and nearly 90% of the global population of learners being negatively impacted (United Nations, 2020; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021). Even though educational institutions were required to shut down in-person operations, they soon realized it was impossible to halt all teaching and learning activities indefinitely; therefore, they began transitioning these activities to an online environment (Raj Kumar et al., 2022; Shomotova et al., 2022; Weaver et al., 2023).

Considering that traditionally, doctoral programs face attrition rates across different fields of approximately 50% for in-person programs and 10% to 20% higher for online programs (Capello, 2023), it is important to explore to what extent the pandemic exacerbated the already complex academic journey doctoral students faced as they spend most of their time handling tasks that require time management, self-motivation, and self-direction, such as literature reviews, data collection, and manuscript writing (Sverdlik et al., 2022). For example, Levine et al. (2021) found

that doctoral students expressed concerns regarding delays in their research projects due to the COVID-19 outbreak, especially among students whose dissertation projects relied on fieldwork or in-person interactions. Additionally, others alluded to the need for proper equipment and limited access to institutional resources that would help them complete academic requirements (Levin et al., 2021; Sverdlik et al., 2022). Aside from program completion challenges, students reported higher depression and stress levels due to social isolation, responsibility overload, and abrupt adaptation to remote or hybrid environments (Capello, 2023; Donohue et al., 2021; Sverdlik et al., 2022).

Furthermore, it is important to consider the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on academic programs that attract nontraditional students, such as the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) degree program (Capello, 2023; Geesa et al., 2023; Paufler et al., 2022; Terry & Ghosh, 2015). Ed.D. students, also referred to as scholar-practitioners (Geesa et al., 2023), often are required to manage time constraints as they face different intersecting responsibilities emanating from their multiple roles, such as doctoral student, spouse/significant other, mother/father, and full-time employee (Capello, 2023; Terry & Ghosh, 2015). Therefore, the pandemic abruptly introduced additional layers of responsibilities to scholar-practitioners, such as quickly managing the transition to online or hybrid teaching, learning, and working environments while keeping pace with their doctoral studies, caring for themselves, their families, and their educational institutions (Brochu et al., 2021; Bukko & Dhesi, 2021; Capello, 2023).

Sverdlik et al. (2022) described that pre-pandemic, women had been conducting scholarly research facing challenges due to traditional gender roles associated with managing household responsibilities and motherhood, alongside meeting academic requirements, which have left them with higher levels of stress stemming from attempting to maintain a healthy work-life-academic

balance. Even without caregiving roles, female researchers have encountered lower publication rates, decreased sense of belonging within their department, and reduced emotional and social availability in their personal lives due to program demands (Brochu et al., 2021; Caldarulo et al., 2022). Consequently, the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated such gender-based challenges, particularly in the areas of childcare, caregiving responsibilities, and unpaid household work, as lockdowns and social distancing mandates were implemented to stop the spread of the virus (Alon et al., 2020; Caldarulo et al., 2022; Sverdlik et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic left women in academia, particularly scholar-practitioners, without proper support managing their multiple roles, adapting to their new realities within the COVID-19 pandemic, transitioning to online or hybrid environments, caring for themselves and their families, and persisting through their Ed.D. programs (Capello, 2023; Sverdlik et al., 2022). Furthermore, as educational leaders, Ed.D. students were tasked to navigate new policies and procedures to safeguard the well-being of their educational institutions (Capello, 2023).

Looking further into the literature, the intersectionality of being both a woman and a person of color is important to highlight, as each one of these identities has experienced some level of oppression (Walsh et al., 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, women of color faced a higher risk of contracting and dying from COVID-19 complications due to historical inequalities, such as suffering from pre-existing health conditions, living in multigenerational households, and lacking proper access to healthcare resources (Andrews Adlam et al., 2022). In addition, the pandemic increased unbalanced work environments for women of color due to their conflicting responsibilities, especially for those with caregiving roles and family responsibilities, such as childcare and household work, as cultural and familial expectations are driven by their gender, race, and class (Caldarulo et al., 2022; Gaudet et al., 2022; Górska et al., 2021; Kirk-Jenkins et al.,

2021; Oleschuk, 2020). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted inequalities such as financial security, as Black and Latina women disproportionately lost jobs in some of the hardest-hit sectors during the pandemic, such as education, hospitality, and retail, as these jobs lack paid sick leave and the flexibility to work from home (Kurtz, 2021). Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately harmed women of color, as they had to balance multiple responsibilities, face challenging financial uncertainties, and cope with health disparities (Carli, 2020; Sverdlik et al., 2022).

PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Given the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on Ed.D. students, women conducting research, and women of color, I find it significant to examine the intersectionality of these three identities. While the literature on each one of these identities exists, research focusing on Chicana or Mexican-American female scholar-practitioners is limited. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore, highlight, and add to the literature on the experiences of Chicana or Mexican-American female scholar-practitioners who were involved in any of the dissertation stages, such as capstone, dissertation research, or dissertation writing during the COVID-19 pandemic, starting in March 2020.

This study is significant as it brings attention to Chicana or Mexican-American women, who have the lowest education attainment rates among the Latina subgroups (Carrillo & Dean, 2020). I sporadically used the Latina label as a concept encompassing data representing women of Latin America (Mexico, South, and Central America) or Caribbean origins and acknowledge the diversity of non-Spanish speaking countries (Baca Zinn & Zambrana, 2019; Carrillo & Dean, 2020; Espino, 2016; Martínez & Gonzalez, 2021). Although, I used the Chicana or Mexican-American label to represent disaggregated data or literature that refers exclusively to women of

Mexican descent, Mexican origin, and Mexican ancestry living in the United States (Baca Zinn & Zambrana, 2019; Espino, 2016). I acknowledge that although not all Mexican-American women choose to self-identify as Chicanas, I consider it significant to highlight the Chicana term as it brings awareness to how race, class, gender, and other social, cultural, and political relations affect identity formation and shape life experiences (Vera & Santos, 2005).

Research Question and Approach of the Study

The overarching research question is: W*hat were the experiences of Chicana doctoral students in a Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) degree program during the dissertation phase within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?* The study aligns with the Chicana feminist framework that highlights Chicanas' life experiences, recognizes that Chicanas navigate life facing different opportunities compared to White women and men, and integrates family, class, immigration, language, religion, and ethnic backgrounds as part of Chicanas' educational experiences (Calderón et al., 2012; Carrillo & Dean, 2020; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). The study follows the Chicana feminist framework's goal of acknowledging Chicana doctoral students as agents of knowledge while validating their experiences and realities (Delgado Bernal, 1998). Furthermore, I used testimonio as the methodology for data collection and analysis, which aligns with the Chicana feminist framework by connecting the Chicana community with academia (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Testimonio methodology allowed me to conduct collaborative research with the testimonialistas by exposing, analyzing, emphasizing, legitimizing stories of resistance, leadership, healing, and advocacy (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012) while aiming to acknowledge testimonalistas' experiences, drawing from their personal, cultural, and social realities (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Pérez Huber, 2009; Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

By 2060, the Latina population is estimated to comprise one-third of the overall female population in the United States (Crumb, 2022; Gàndara et al., 2015; Hesse & Jewett, 2022). Despite their demographic representation, Latinas hold low percentages of doctoral degree attainment, are more likely to be the head of a single-parent household, and have higher poverty levels in comparison to Asian and White women (Gàndara et al., 2015; Ramos et al., 2020). The National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (2022a) indicates that over time, there has been a positive trend in doctoral degree attainment among Latinas. For example, in 2012, Latinas earned 1,515 of the 23,526 doctoral degrees awarded to women (see Table 1.1), which, in comparison to 2011, represents a 2.87% increase. Even though the data shows an upward change, the Latina doctoral degree attainment denoted only 6.44% of the total doctoral degrees awarded to women in 2012. From 2011 to 2021, there has been a steady increase in the number of Latina doctorate recipients over the years, although, in comparison to White and Asian women, the Latina community is still disproportionately underrepresented, as shown in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1

Table 1.1: Female Research Doctorate Recipients by Ethnicity and Race: 2022 - 2021

	Ethnicity and Race								
Year	**Hispanic or Latino**	**American Indian or Alaska Native**	**Asian**	**Black or African American**	**White**	**More than one race**	**Other race or race not reported**	**Ethnicity not reported**	**Totals**
2011	1,421	79	4,904	1,396	12,572	399	191	1,737	**22,699**
2012	1,515	65	5,117	1,481	12,941	484	202	1,721	**23,526**
2013	1,550	64	5,392	1,554	13,263	497	204	1,841	**24,365**
2014	1,559	55	5,465	1,503	13,323	488	162	2,258	**24,813**
2015	1,664	77	5,598	1,660	13,518	535	167	2,128	**25,347**
2016	1,806	73	5,513	1,661	13,611	605	192	1,761	**25,222**
2017	1,761	62	5,588	1,747	13,397	593	312	1,624	**25,084**
2018	1,726	72	5,899	1,726	13,572	655	333	1,326	**25,309**
2019	1,989	66	5,999	1,831	13,191	678	373	1,361	**25,488**
2020	2,061	61	5,902	1,773	13,207	644	353	1,363	**25,364**
2021	2,008	65	5,665	1,797	11,841	652	342	1,786	**24,156**

Note: Data are from "Table 1-10. Female research doctorate recipients, by ethnicity, race, and citizenship status: 2011–21," by the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2022, *Doctorate Recipients for U.S. Universities: 2021*. (https://ncses.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf23300/data-tables). In the public domain.

Looking further into the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (2022a, b) data, Latina underrepresentation in doctoral attainment is more evident at a large scale in contrast to the overall doctoral degree attainment in the United States (Tables 1.2 and 1.3). Considering the data presented in Tables 1.1 and 1.2, Table 1.3 provides data for 2011, 2016, and 2021 to illustrate Latina representation at a national scale.

Table 1.2

Table 1.2: Research Doctorate Recipients, by Historical Broad Field of Doctorate and Sex: Selected years, 1991–2021

Field and Sex	1991	1996	2001	2006	2011	2016	2021
Male	23,521	25,288	22,780	25,020	26,188	29,572	28,082
Female	13,873	16,956	17,887	20,559	22,699	25,222	24,156
Totals	**37,530**	**42,437**	**40,744**	**45,620**	**48,909**	**54,809**	**52,250**

Note. Includes respondents who did not report sex. Data are from "Table 1-4. Research doctorate recipients, by historical broad field of doctorate and sex: Selected years, 1991–2021," by the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2022, *Doctorate Recipients for U.S. Universities: 2021*. (https://ncses.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf23300/data-tables). In the public domain.

Table 1.3

Table 1.3: Hispanic or Latino (Female) Doctorate Recipients, in Comparison to Women and Men: Selected years, 2011, 2016, and 2021

	2011	2016	2021
Totals	**48,909**	**54,809**	**52,250**
Male	26,188	29,572	28,082
Female	22,699	25,222	24,156
Hispanic or Latino (Female)	1,421	1,806	2,008

Note: The Hispanic or Latino (Female) data are from "Table 1-4. Research doctorate recipients, by historical broad field of doctorate and sex: Selected years, 1991–2021," by the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2022, *Doctorate Recipients for U.S. Universities: 2021*. (https://ncses.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf23300/data-tables). In the public domain. The male and female data are from "Table 1-10. Female research doctorate recipients, by ethnicity, race, and citizenship status: 2011–21," by the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics,

2022, *Doctorate Recipients for U.S. Universities: 2021*.

(https://ncses.nsf.gov/pubs/nsf23300/data-tables). In the public domain.

Due to the changing demographics of the United States, the low doctoral attainment of the Latina community, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial to explore the life experiences of Chicanas or Mexican American women who graduated from Ed.D. programs. Thus, this study intends to acknowledge Chicanas' challenges and highlight their stories of resistance to inform doctoral programs, particularly Ed.D. programs, on strategies to strengthen support systems and develop mechanisms to ensure academic completion and professional development (Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020).

Summary

This chapter introduces the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the purpose and significance of the study, the research question and approach, and the problem statement. Chapter two reviews the literature on the topic and provides the conceptual framework guiding the study. Chapter three describes the methodological approach and how the data was analyzed. Chapter four presents the findings from the data analysis, and Chapter five discusses the findings and provides recommendations.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted Ed.D. students' personal, academic, and professional identities by merging all their activities into a single virtual environment. The COVID-19 pandemic required doctoral students to abruptly adapt their daily lives and make sense of their new responsibilities. The chapter begins with the context of COVID-19 and how it affected higher education, women, Ed.D. students, and racial/ethnic minority groups, followed by literature on Latina doctoral students, and concludes with the conceptual framework guiding the study.

COVID-19 Pandemic and Higher Education

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the rapid spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus a pandemic. On that day, there were approximately 118,000 cases of people who had contracted the COVID-19 virus in 114 countries, and approximately 4,291 people had died (World Health Organization, 2020a). To stop the spread of the virus, governments mandated the closing of borders, businesses, and schools, which caused high levels of unemployment and required the restructuring of work and personal activities along with social distancing measures and stay-at-home orders (Raj Kumar et al., 2022).

In the education sector prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, institutions of higher education had been developing strategies to deal with public safety threats and natural disasters, such as armed shooters, wildfires, hurricanes, tornadoes, or the H1N1 swine flu, which have been relatively brief or bound to a geographical location (Donohue et al., 2021; Raj Kumar et al., 2022; Weaver et al., 2023). For example, Ekmekci & Bergstrand (2010) analyzed the online available preparedness and continuity plans of 20 universities in the United States and the role of information technology (IT) to determine how these institutions were utilizing their IT infrastructure to deal with potential crises, such as the H1N1 pandemic. The authors concluded that universities' ability

to adapt to unpredictable events largely depends on their capacity to efficiently match the speed and direction of the change. To accomplish this change, three themes emerged: IT service configuration, faculty readiness, and student readiness. A study by Wilson & Huttlinger (2010) surveyed 175 students at New Mexico State University during the peak of the H1N1 influenza outbreak to incorporate this data into the university's preparedness and response plans. The researchers found that sex, race, age, and on-campus living had minimal influence on H1N1 health practices and knowledge. However, according to the research, faculty attitudes and knowledge, low levels of flu-like illnesses at the university, and informal support systems along with social media had the most impact on students' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.

Although emergency operation plans were already common at the higher institution level (Weaver et al., 2023), the COVID-19 pandemic required a different approach as it became a global crisis in a short period of time (Donohue et al., 2021; Raj Kumar et al., 2022). Almost 1.6 billion students in more than 190 countries were impacted due to school shutdowns (United Nations Educational, Science and Cultural Organization, 2021). Specifically, universities worldwide had to close their physical campuses and transition to online teaching and learning spaces to prioritize the health of their students, faculty, and staff while still offering essential services for their students, such as library and computer services, facilities support, housing and dining services, and health and safety support (Weaver et al., 2023).

In the United States, the 2020 spring semester was significantly disruptive as 1,300 colleges and universities in all 50 states canceled in-person classes or shifted to online-only instruction (Smalley, 2021). The first major university to move courses to an online environment was the University of Washington, followed by Stanford University on March 6, 2020 (Mangan, 2020). To adapt to the move to online teaching and learning, faculty changed how students were

evaluated, such as by altering exam structures or decreasing the number of assignments; additionally, institutions rapidly modified their learning management systems so faculty could complete tasks such as taking attendance, posting syllabi, recording lectures, sharing electronic readings and resources, facilitating group discussions and projects, managing discussion forums, administering online exams, and recording and providing grades and feedback (Raj Kumar et al., 2022; Smalley, 2021). Despite these adjustments, Whitford (2021) described that the COVID-19 pandemic represented a financial burden for institutions of higher education as they were experiencing additional expenses related to COVID-19 testing, protective equipment, and online learning and teaching resources while at the same time facing revenue losses from tuition, housing, and extra-curricular activities, such as athletics and other events. For example, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2022) showed that enrollment from spring 2020 to spring 2021 declined by 3.5% in all educational sectors (see Table 2.1). Although enrollment declines vary by institution, the public 2-year sector showed the most significant decline among the rest of the sectors.

Table 2.1

Table 2.1: Estimated National Enrollment by Institutional Sector: Spring 2020 to 2022

Sectors	Spring 2022		Spring 2021		Spring 2020	
	Enrollment	% Change Previous Year	Enrollment	% Change Previous Year	Enrollment	% Change Previous Year
Total Enrollment (All Sectors)	16,170,266	-4.1%	16,855,30 -	-3.5%	17,458,306	-0.5%
Public 4-year	7,252,413	-3.4%	7,505,850	-0.6%	7,551,244	-0.6%
Private nonprofit 4-year	3,682,997	-1.7%	3,747,921	-0.8%	3,776,462	-0.7%
Private for-profit 4-year	716,875	-0.2%	718,557	-1.5%	729,364	-1.9%
Public 2-year	4,169,930	-7.8%	4,521,046	-9.5%	4,997,043	-2.3%
Unduplicated Student Headcount (All Sectors)	Sectors) 15,917,249	-4.0%	16,586,893	-3.5%	17,185,751	-0.4%

Note. The unduplicated headcount provides the number of unique students with no double counting. This figure can be used to determine the percentage of concurrent enrollments in any given year. Data are from "Term Enrollment Estimates Spring 2022," by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022. (https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/CTEE_Report_Spring_2022.pdf). In the public domain.

The immediate economic impact of the pandemic compelled several states to reduce funding for higher education institutions, with some states relying on federal CARES Act funding to prevent more substantial cuts. Additionally, due to decreasing enrollment, public institutions had to navigate expected decreases in state funding (Smalley, 2021). By the fall 2020 semester, higher education institutions had exceeded $120 billion in revenue losses and added costs related

to the COVID-19 pandemic (Mitchell, 2020). Aside from financial challenges and the adaptation of learning and teaching activities, the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated both racial and gender inequalities (Cohen & van der Meulen Rodgers, 2021; Raj Kumar et al., 2022). In society and within institutions of higher education, these inequalities speak to issues related to living, working, and studying from home, managing multiple roles and responsibilities, accessing resources, having support systems, uncertainty about the future, and finding purpose to conclude academic programs (Bukko & Dhesi, 2021; Raj Kumar et al., 2022; Walsh et al., 2021).

COVID-19 Pandemic and Women

The COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the pre-existing gender gap in employment and earning power (Ahluwalia-Cameron, 2022; Alon et al., 2020; Cohen & van der Meulen Rodgers, 2021; Fisher & Ryan, 2021; Raj Kumar et al., 2022). This is attributed to the divergent occupational and industrial concentrations of women and men (Cohen & van der Meulen Rodgers, 2021). Historically, recessions in the United States have affected men's employment more than women's, as male-dominated industries like construction and manufacturing have seen greater job losses during economic downturns compared to women-dominated service industries such as education, hospitality, restaurants, and health care (Alon et al., 2020; Carli, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic differs from previous recessions as the service industry was significantly vulnerable to social distancing mandates and stay-at-home orders (Alon et al., 2020; Carli, 2020; Cohen & van der Meulen Rodgers, 2021). Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic has been referred to as a “she-cession” (Carli, 2020; Cohen & van der Meulen Rodgers, 2021). Preventive measures lead to business closures or a reduction in the labor force within the industry, which negatively impacted womens’ earning power (Carli, 2020; Cohen & van der Meulen Rodgers, 2021). For example, at the time the COVID-19 pandemic was declared,

according to the United Nations (2020), worldwide, most healthcare workers were women, making up 70 % of the frontline or essential workforce, such as nurses, midwives, community health workers, and health facility staff. In an online survey by the Washington Post (2020), frontline employees working away from home shared worries about getting infected and spreading the virus to their family members. Furthermore, they expressed that although their employers provided them with protective clothing and equipment, their workplace experienced shortages of protective gear. Thus, the fear of COVID-19 infection and protective gear shortages increased stress levels on essential workers (Carli, 2020).

Another critical aspect of the COVID-19 outbreak is that the pandemic highlighted the heavy reliance of the world's economies and daily routines on the often unnoticed and unpaid work carried out by women (United Nations, 2020). The "second shift" refers to the unpaid household work women do to fulfill the needs of their families apart from the paid work they do outside their homes (Cohen & van der Meulen Rodgers, 2021). In the COVID-19 pandemic context, the "second shift" was more evident due to the large-scale and abrupt school closures and reduced support services, such as daycares and eldercare services, which in turn increased household work, homeschooling duties, childcare, and family-related responsibilities (Alon et al., 2020; Carli, 2020). Although men shared household and caregiving responsibilities in the pre-pandemic world, women spent significantly more time on these activities (Ahluwalia-Cameron, 2022). Carlson et al. (2020) surveyed 1,025 parents in the United States, finding an overall increase in domestic responsibilities for mothers who were already doing most of the household labor. The imbalance in household responsibilities results in women taking on more unpaid work, which in turn disrupts their professional lives; thus, women experience a significant reduction in work hours compared to men, more so if there are mothers to young children (Carli, 2020; Carlson et al., 2020). However,

given the increased time spent at home, women and men reported an increase in men's contribution to childcare and housework responsibilities, which can be attributed to unemployment, reduced work hours, or the level of telecommuting (Alon et al., 2020; Carlson et al., 2020).

COVID-19 Pandemic and Ed.D. Students

Research doctoral programs awarding a Doctor of Philosophy in Education (Ph.D.) tend to be full-time endeavors that allow full-time students to focus on their coursework and research (Terry & Ghosh, 2015). In contrast, professional programs, such as a Doctor in Education (Ed.D.) degree program, lean toward serving nontraditional students who work full-time mainly in the field of education (Capello, 2023; Geesa et al., 2023; Paufler et al., 2022; Terry & Ghosh, 2015), also known as scholar-practitioners (Geesa et al., 2023). Ed.D. programs equip students for leadership roles by instructing them in the principles of education, policies, and methodologies to create opportunities for evolving and revolutionizing educational practices within academic institutions (Bukko & Dhesi, 2021). In the United States, Ed.D. programs historically have reported attrition rates higher than 50% (Capello, 2023; Capello et al., 2021). Although the percentage is representative of a pre-pandemic context, the estimated attrition rate for doctoral students during the pandemic is still being determined, but it is likely that students faced heightened pressures on their academic, emotional, and mental well-being (Marotta, 2024).

Ed.D. students are required to navigate their academic journey while managing their personal and professional roles and commitments, which may create multiple and sometimes conflicting undertakings as they attempt to balance these conflicting domains (Capello, 2023). Nonetheless, the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the already complex nature of an Ed.D. program as students were forced to quickly adapt to the convergence of their professional, personal, and academic roles into a single virtual space (Brochu, et al., 2021; Bukko & Dhesi, 2021; Capello,

2023). Additionally, scholar-practitioners may have experienced new responsibilities, such as homeschooling their children, moving to remote or hybrid teaching and learning, keeping their educational community safe; meeting their academic responsibilities, and caring for themselves and their family members (Capello, 2023; Capello et al., 2021).

For example, the COVID-19 pandemic increased feelings of isolation and burnout as Ed.D. students had to work, study, and live in the same space (Bukko & Dhesi, 2021; Capello et al., 2021). In contrast, before the pandemic, they were able to compartmentalize their roles and responsibilities as they were defined by separate spaces, such as their houses, offices, and classrooms (Bukko & Dhesi, 2021). Moreover, scholar-practitioners encountered the closure of their work offices and university classrooms, which required a prompt adaptation of their living space to accommodate the required equipment to meet their professional and academic obligations, such as computers, printers, scanners, and other necessary materials (Capello et al., 2021; Huchting, & Stephenson, 2021). Also, as educational leaders, they led their institutions through the creation and adaptation of policies and practices to align with COVID-19 preventive measures, such as creating distance-learning programs or creating plans to transition students, teachers, and staff to an online or hybrid online environment (Bukko & Dhesi, 2021; Capello et al., 2021).

Additionally, resulting from their professional contexts, Ed.D. students experience an increase in emotional labor resulting from attending to colleagues' and students' needs, seeking connections, and making sense of challenges and experiences through adapting to their new professional and personal realities (Bukko & Dhesi, 2021; Capello 2023). For example, Sroka (2021) described, as an Ed.D. student during the COVID-19 pandemic, how colleagues strove to feel connected by entering online support groups and group text messages as an attempt to alleviate

their feelings of isolation and how by sharing their mental and emotional challenges helped them find comfort, support, and a sense of community.

COVID-19 Pandemic and Racial/Ethnic Minority Groups

The COVID-19 pandemic worsened long-standing unequal opportunities and support for racial and minority groups (Raj Kumar et al., 2022; Weaver et al., 2023). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020) reported that systemic health and social inequities put some members of racial and ethnic minority groups at higher risk of contracting COVID-19. Duong et al. (2023) performed a comprehensive analysis of the literature to examine the evidence on the link between ethnicity and COVID-19 outcomes, and their findings indicated that Black and Hispanic communities had an increased likelihood of contracting COVID-19 compared to their White counterparts. There are social determinants of health that contribute to the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on racial and ethnic minorities, such as disparities in housing, employment, wealth, and access to healthcare in comparison to White individuals (Tai et al., 2022).

For example, multigenerational living arrangements are more prevalent among racial and ethnic minority communities because of cost-saving benefits or cultural traditions (Duong et al., 2023; Fortuna et al., 2020) As a result, living in crowded environments may heighten the likelihood of COVID-19 transmission since adhering to social distancing guidelines or isolation measures may not be feasible (Fortuna et al., 2020). Another possible explanation for these discrepancies is that individuals belonging to ethnic minority groups are more likely to work in essential industries where they are in close proximity to others, thereby increasing their vulnerability to COVID-19 exposure (Duong et al., 2023).

Furthermore, layoffs and reduction of working hours had a more significant impact on individuals from racial and ethnic minorities (Tai et al., 2022). For instance, in April 2020, the

unemployment rate peaked at 16.7% for Black and 18.9% for Hispanic workers compared to 14.2% for their White counterparts, and these gaps persisted until February 2021 (Frank et al., 2021). Tied to the increase in unemployment, racial and ethnic groups saw a quicker reduction in their wealth as they utilized their savings and retirement accounts and sold assets to meet their regular household expenses (Tai et al., 2022). Since for many individuals, health insurance is tied to employment, unemployment increased the number of people from ethnic minority groups that were not insured, which limited their access to health services when infected with COVID-19 (Duong et al., 2023; Tai et al., 2022). Additionally, minorities are disproportionately affected by chronic health conditions, such as diabetes, heart disease, and lung disease. These conditions can lead to worse COVID-19 outcomes, increasing their risk of hospitalization (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; Duong et al., 2023; Tai et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted learning and teaching activities at the higher education level (Raj Kumar et al., 2022). Particularly for scholar-practitioners, the pandemic required them to take on new responsibilities, adapt to new ways of learning, and keep up with their multiple roles (Capello, 2023). Furthermore, for racial and minority groups, the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated long-standing inequalities (Raj Kumar et al., 2022; Weaver et al., 2023). This context is critical to this study as it focuses on Chicana and Mexican-American women and how the pandemic impacted their Ed.D. journey. The following section reviews literature on Latina doctoral students.

LATINA DOCTORAL STUDENTS

The Latino community is the largest and fastest-growing population in the United States and is still vastly underrepresented in institutions of higher education (Bruhn, 2022; Espino, 2014, 2016; Espino et al., 2010; Espinoza, 2010; Gàndara et al., 2015; Gonzalez, 2007; Gutierrez et al.,

2020; Hinojosa & Carney, 2016; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020; Vera & Santos, 2005). Specifically, Latinas remain severely underrepresented in higher education at predominantly White institutions (Cabrera et al., 2024; Crumb, 2022; Espinoza, 2010). Despite evidence indicating the necessity for a more comprehensive insight into Latinas, rarely does the literature disaggregate the data by social class, ethnicity, or other identities (Carrillo & Dean, 2020; Espino et al., 2010; Ramirez, 2017). Latinas enroll in higher education at similar rates as non-Latinas, but they are less likely to earn college degrees and go on to graduate or professional school (Carrillo & Dean, 2020; Espinoza, 2010; Gutierrez et al., 2022). Despite an upward trend in doctorate degree attainment among Latinas from 2011 to 2021, the Latina community is still underrepresented by showing attainment rates lower than 10% throughout the decade in comparison to the attainment of White and Asian women (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, 2022a).

Deficit Model

Students entering doctoral programs are regarded as high academic achievers who are familiar with the culture in higher education and have demonstrated their academic aptitude (Donohue et al., 2021) by having completed multiple degrees, including a bachelor's degree and, in most cases, a master's degree (Gittings et al., 2018). However, the literature points out that Latinas in higher education may experience systemic oppression in the form of lack of socialization, mentorship, and research opportunities (Carrillo & Dean, 2020; Crumb, 2022; Gutierrez et al., 2022; Herrera & Gloria, 2023). Additionally, Latina students may face added stressors that affect educational success in doctoral programs, such as low socioeconomic status, cultural pressures, conflicts between family obligations and school responsibilities, and negative stereotypes (Cabrera et al., 2024; Espino, 2016). However, it is important to highlight that much of this research has been conducted from a deficit model that outlines the barriers Latina students

must overcome to succeed instead of focusing on those factors that have guided student success (Espino, 2016).

For instance, Chicanas, Mexican-American women, or Latinas may place great emphasis on familismo, which is the cultural value that emphasizes loyalty, family relationships, community collaboration, and prioritizes family over personal interests (Espino, 2016; Espinoza, 2010; Gutierrez et al., 2022; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020). Women with a strong sense of familismo may experience internal conflicts of investing more time in their academic work rather than dedicating that time to their family and vice versa (Espino, 2016; Espinoza, 2010; Hernandez, 2015; López et al., 2022). Therefore, Chicanas, Mexican-American women, and Latinas with a strong sense of familismo may place family commitments first instead of personal or academic goals if these goals negatively impact sibling or parent caretaking, financial contributions to the household, or the possibility of having to move away from the family household to attend graduate school (Espinoza, 2010; Gutierrez et al., 2022; Hernandez, 2015; López et al., 2022).

Chicana Feminism – Multiple Identities

Contrary to the deficit model, Chicana feminism highlights elements that drive Chicana's strength and resilience (Cabrera et al., 2024; Carrillo & Dean, 2020). The central point of Chicana feminism is to focus attention on the development of skills that assist in preserving someone's ethnic or cultural identity while learning to adapt to the dominant culture (Espinoza, 2010; Vera & de los Santos, 2005). The Chicana feminist philosophy explores and highlights issues regarding ethnicity, class, and gender and the intersection with other social locations (Vera & de los Santos, 2005). Hence, Chicana feminism embodies resistance, resilience, wisdom, and flexibility while keeping alive cultural identity and a female voice in a society ruled by a dominant culture (Baca Zinn & Zambrana, 2019; Vera & Santos, 2005; Martinez, 1996). Anzaldúa (1987) perceived

Chicanas as residing in a metaphorical space called the "borderlands" that represents a symbolic location, a line between the United States and Mexico, or the intersection between these two cultures. Anzaldúa's "borderlands" represents and brings together multiple spaces, cultures, ethnicities, genders, and social classes (Anzaldúa, 1987; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Martinez, 1996). Therefore, the process of navigating multiple cultures or living in the "borderlands" creates what Anzaldúa (1987) calls a "mestiza" identity. This identity is the product of merging the White, Mexican, and Indian cultures, which allows for adaptability and flexibility while navigating inconsistencies, ambiguity, and contradictions encountered in Chicanas' daily lives, such as constantly switching between different languages, cultural traditions, and socio-political realities (Anzaldúa, 1987; Baca Zinn & Zambrana, 2019; Martinez, 1996; Vera, & Santos, 2005).

Consequently, Chicana feminism is crucial to understanding how Chicanas, Mexican-American women, or Latinas navigate their multiple identities that emanate from their academic pursuits, family obligations, and professional responsibilities (Espino, 2016; Espino et al., 2010; Gutierrez et al., 2022). Therefore, Chicana, Mexican-American female, or Latina doctoral students can be perceived as women living at the limit of their cultural and social realities who have learned to negotiate conflicts, expectations, and priorities originating from their multiple realities (Sánchez & Hernández, 2022). For instance, in addition to familismo, marianismo is associated with motherhood, kindness, submissiveness, selflessness, devotion to family, and responsibility for household and caregiving responsibilities (Castillo et al., 2010; Espinoza, 2010; Gutierrez et al., 2022). Marianismo supports the idea that Chicanas or Latinas should devote themselves to their family and prioritize family responsibilities over fulfilling demands imposed by other institutions (Espinoza, 2010; Garcia et al., 2022).

Cultural Wealth

Although familismo and marianismo may be understood from a deficiency model that contributes to dropouts and attrition rates (Carrillo & Dean, 2020), these are also values that can be interpreted from a community cultural wealth model, which values intangible assets, such as community knowledge, skills, and abilities that underrepresented groups hold (Yosso, 2005). Community cultural wealth challenges the deficit model associated with subgroups that do not represent the dominant culture (Espino, 2014; López et al., 2022; Yosso, 2005) and recognizes intangible assets, such as familismo and marianismo as key elements in the pursuit of doctoral degree attainment (Carrillo & Dean, 2020; Espino, 2016; Espinoza, 2010). Therefore, community cultural wealth is a form of resistance against oppressive structures and deficiency models (López et al., 2022). As a result, family connections are key for Chicana and Latina empowerment, persistence, resistance, and academic success (Baca Zinn & Zambrana, 2019; Espino, 2016; Espinoza, 2010; López et al., 2022; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020). Familismo and marianismo serve as intangible support systems through words of encouragement, motivation, and spiritual support (Castillo et al., 2010; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020). Intangible support assets also provide a sense of belonging that compensates for the individualistic culture of academic work (Espinoza, 2010). Sánchez & Hernández (2022) narrate an example of using community cultural wealth to help first-generation students with their scholarship applications. Participants in the research (Sánchez & Hernández, 2022) identified as first-generation Mexican-American students who were encouraged to speak with their families, learn about their family history, and incorporate what they learned into their essays. Encouraging the connection with their family allowed students to activate their community's cultural wealth, uplift their family heritage, and present them with a different way of doing research (Sánchez & Hernández, 2022).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Delgado Bernal (1998) and Fierros & Delgado Bernal (2016) state that epistemology represents the researcher's worldview, and it is guided by the researcher's experiences and social environment. Thus, feminists of color involved in education research have drawn from their own realities to create knowledge that represents and validates their alternative ways of understanding the world (Calderón et al., 2012). As a result, Chicana feminist epistemologies have emerged to uncover new knowledge and distinct ways of conducting research (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016).

The theoretical framework guiding this study is the Chicana feminist epistemology. The Chicana feminist epistemology (Delgado Bernal, 1998) provided the theory and guided the development of the research. Using a Chicana feminist epistemology allowed me to address the research question by grounding the study in concepts that focus on Chicana or Mexican-American female doctoral students. The participants were asked questions that allowed for the exploration of their experiences related to navigating their multiple roles and responsibilities within an unprecedented event, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chicana Feminism Origin

The development of social science theories originates from a White, male, and European context (Martínez, 1996). Patricia Hill Collins (2015) suggests that Eurocentric male theorists established a validation process that authenticated knowledge that followed a male Eurocentric worldview. Thus, theories or knowledge that did not follow these standards were considered marginal (Collins, 2015). As a consequence, social theories exposing dynamics oppressing women would be disregarded even more so if they accounted for the intersection of race, ethnicity, class, and gender (Collins, 2015; Martínez, 1996). Even though traditional feminists valued women's

experiences, they only considered gender as part of the social positioning of women's experiences and ignored other elements (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Martínez, 1996). Consequently, the feminist movement's origins neglected the experiences of women of color, such as Chicanas, African American women, Asian women, Latinas, and American Indian women (Martínez, 1996).

Since the annexation of Texas in 1845, Mexicans and Americans of Mexican descent have faced a bicultural world full of contradicting forces from maintaining their cultural heritage while finding their place within the mainstream culture (Martinez, 1996). Conflicts and tensions between two different cultures vary based on people's abilities to manage, engage, and embrace the behaviors of Mexican and American cultures (Carrillo & Dean, 2020; Espinoza, 2010). Along with a bicultural identity, Mexican Americans have faced systemic issues related to racism and classism in education, employment, politics, and the media (Garcia; 1989; Martinez, 1996). In the 1960s, the United States experienced the development of the Chicano movement, which focused on addressing issues of social justice, educational reforms, and political and economic representation in favor of the Chicano community (Baca Zinn & Zambrana, 2019; Carrillo & Dean, 2020; Garcia, 1989). At the same time as the Chicano movement, other initiatives emerged, such as the United Farmworkers unionization, the New Mexico land grant movement, the Colorado base crusade for justice, the Chicano student movement, and the Raza Unida party (Garcia, 1989).

Along with Chicanos, Chicanas actively participated in social protests (Garcia, 1989), but the Chicana feminist movement emerged from the struggle for equality within the Chicano movement and the reassessment of their role within family and society (Baca Zinn & Zambrana, 2019; Espinoza, 2010; Garcia, 1989). As the Chicano Movement evolved, Chicanas began to assess the rewards and limitations of their participation within the Chicano Movement and the

society at large (Garcia, 1989). Consequently, Chicana consciousness arose, and Chicana feminists began exploring the forces shaping their own experiences as women of color (Baca Zinn & Zambrana, 2019; Carrillo & Dean, 2020; Garcia, 1989). By the 1970s, Chicana feminists began pointing out the importance of learning how to maintain their ethnic or cultural identity while adapting to the dominant culture (Baca Zinn & Zambrana, 2019; Vera, & Santos, 2005). Therefore, Chicana feminists gave importance to looking beyond class and gender as common barriers to women's advancement and emphasized incorporating issues of migration, family background, English proficiency, religion, and school practices (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Carrillo & Dean, 2020).

Chicana Feminist Epistemology

Historically, institutions of higher education have disregarded students' identities as part of the research, praxis, and policies in specific doctoral programs (Calderón et al., 2012; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Espino et al., 2012; Sánchez, & Hernández, 2022). As in the origins of the feminist movement, feminist scholarship considered gender as the primary component of women's positioning within the educational system (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Martínez, 1996); such framework only allowed for the analyses of women's lives guided by commonalities rather than differences (Calderón et al., 2012; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Espino et al., 2010; Trueba, 2002). Chicana feminists began employing Chicana feminist epistemology to overcome the deficiencies of both mainstream feminism and educational scholarship by bringing to light social, political, and cultural conditions affecting Chicanas (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Calderón et al., 2012).

The objective of Chicana feminist epistemology is to decolonize knowledge by challenging notions of objectivity and depicting alternative ways of knowing (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado

Bernal et al., 2012). In addition to recognizing social class, race, and sex, Chicana feminist epistemology acknowledges migration status, family background, English proficiency, and religion as part of Chicana identity (Calderón et al., 2012; Carrillo & Dean, 2020; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Sánchez et al., 2021). Chicana feminist epistemology also amplifies Chicanas' voices, experiences, and knowledge as a way of defying cultural hegemonic domination (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Sánchez et al., 2021). Therefore, researchers using a Chicana feminist epistemology are concerned with framing research questions that allow Chicanas to share their stories, acknowledge their experiences, honor their mestiza identity, resist dominant research, and challenge objectivity (Anzaldúa; 1987; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Thus, Chicana feminist epistemology paves the way for Chicanas to create distinct views of the world and consequently create knowledge that laces together lived experiences, cultural intuition, spirituality, and mind (Calderón et al., 2012; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012).

Another element of Chicana feminist epistemology is the concept of cultural intuition, which explains the process by which Chicanas make sense of the world and incorporate that knowledge into the research process (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). According to Delgado Bernal (1998), there are four sources of cultural intuition: personal knowledge (including community memory and collective knowledge), professional experience, existing literature on a specific topic, and the analytical research process that makes sense of the data. Therefore, in essence, cultural intuition is a subjective and changing concept because it relies on Chicanas' views of the world, which is the basis for Chicana feminist epistemology in educational research (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012).

Summary

This chapter reviewed the context of life during the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on higher education, women, Ed.D. students, and racial/ethnic minority groups, which is critical to this study as it focuses on Chicana and Mexican-American women and how the pandemic impacted their Ed.D. journey. The chapter concluded by identifying Chicana feminist epistemology as the theoretical framework guiding the study. This theoretical framework is appropriate for addressing the research question as it grounds the study in the experiences of Chicana or Mexican-American female doctoral students in relation to their multiple identities and roles within a particular social context. The following chapter will discuss the methodological approach of this study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This qualitative research utilized a Chicana feminist epistemology by collecting testimonios from seven Chicanas who were conducting their Ed.D. dissertation when the COVID-19 pandemic was declared. These Chicanas were able to navigate their academic journey despite the additional challenges brought about by the pandemic. Analyzing participants' testimonios allowed me to contribute to the understanding of Chicanas' stories of perseverance, leadership, healing, and advocacy (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). This chapter introduces the research methodology employed to answer the overarching question guiding the research: *What were the experiences of Chicana doctoral students in a Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) degree program during the dissertation phase within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?* I describe the research design, the participant selection process, research context, methods for data collection, and the methods for data analysis. Then, I reflect on my subjectivity and positionality.

Research Design

To conduct this research, I selected a qualitative research methodology because I seek to understand participants' realities through their behavior and interaction with social phenomena, rather than gathering numerical data and testing hypotheses, such as in quantitative research (Lichtman, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this case, the COVID-19 pandemic was the phenomenon influencing the participants' realities, including their identity, academic journey, and work-life balance. Furthermore, qualitative research allowed me to "Achieve an understanding of how people make sense of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 15).

As the researcher, I understand that my personal background, values, culture, and past experiences may shape the analysis and interpretation of the data collected (Creswell, 2009; Lichtman, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although the interviews were guided by a set of questions, adaptability was key in response to participants' testimonios and the emergence of topics (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each testimonio allowed me to explore and understand testimonialistas' challenges, motivations, feelings, reflections, and strategies for degree completion. The epistemological framework informing the interview protocol and guiding the data collection method and analysis is a critical aspect of the research methodology (Creswell, 2009). Therefore, I have employed a Chicana feminist epistemological framework to create knowledge regarding Chicanas from the reflection of their own experiences, thereby validating their experiences as credible sources of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 1998). The section below describes how I have employed testimonio as a methodology within a Chicana feminist epistemology.

Testimonio Methodology

The narrative research approach is a qualitative research design that focuses on studying first-person stories and experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These narratives can take the form of biographies, autobiographies, oral histories, written narratives, autobiographies, or autoethnophraphies and play a crucial role in helping individuals understand their own realities through a chronological narrative co-authored between the participant and the researcher (Creswell, 2009; Lichtman, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Comparable to narrative inquiry, testimonio creates knowledge and theory through accounts told in first-person by a testimonialista or narrator who shares life experiences with as many details as considered significant in order to

document and theorize about realities in reference to struggles, survival, and resistance (Pérez Huber, 2009; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020).

Testimonio as a method for data collection emerged in Latin America between the 1960s and 1970s, at a time of severe sociopolitical oppression and persecution (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Flores Carmona, 2014; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020). The use of testimonios in the United States emerged during the 1980s and 1990s among marginalized communities, such as the Chicana and Chicano communities, as a way to document and convey individual and community experiences marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance. Therefore, testimonio as a method represents a metaphorical bridge that creates a sense of solidarity and empowerment for those who resonate with these experiences of oppression and resistance (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020). Consequently, testimonio is different from narrative inquiry as it invites testimonialistas to narrate their experiences while reflecting on their involvement with a particular reality by allowing critical inquiry, challenging power, eliciting solidarity, and demanding change (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020).

In educational research, testimonio is more than a method for data collection. Testimonio also serves as a process for data analysis through recovering untold lived experiences and creating a narrative that remains attentive to personal, political, and social realities (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Testimonio as methodology challenges dichotomies by creating and validating knowledge that embodies mind, body, and spirit as valuable sources of knowledge while embracing social change (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Flores Carmona, 2014; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020). Hence, testimonio methodology preserves underrepresented cultural worldviews, community

experiences, and spiritual knowledge passed from generation to generation (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Flores Carmona, 2014; Pérez Huber, 2009).

Testimonio methodology relies on an external advocate to record, transcribe, and prepare a manuscript for publication. At the same time, the external advocate works closely with testimonialistas to amplify their voices, portray their perspectives, assert their right to tell their story, and address questions about who is a valid creator of knowledge (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Additionally, the external advocate or researcher should seek to establish authentic connections with testimonialistas while allowing them to share their experiences of adversity and success in a safe environment (Flores Carmona, 2014). Furthermore, testimonio methodology aligns with critical race-gendered epistemologies, which are systems of knowledge that emerge from the experiences of people of color at the intersections of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression, such as the Chicana feminist epistemology (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Pérez Huber, 2009).

Consequently, positioning testimonio methodology within a Chicana feminist epistemology allows for creating knowledge from Chicanas' personal experiences while questioning objectivity, challenging dichotomies, exposing oppression, building solidarity, and resisting hegemonic thoughts, cultures, and processes that perpetuate inequity (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Flores Carmona, 2014; Pérez Huber, 2009). Although testimonios are technically accounts made by one person, in the aggregate, they represent the voices of many individuals whose lives have been affected by similar or the same events (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodríguez, 2012; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020).

As a result, I chose the testimonio methodology to explore, record, transcribe, reflect, and engage testimonialistas in the research process. The testimonios narrated in this research represent

stories of perseverance, pride, and gratitude that demonstrate women's leadership and love for their community. I sought to validate the Chicana experience as a legitimate source of knowledge while embracing hope, faith, and autonomy as part of their educational experiences (Calderón et al., 2012; Carrillo & Dean, 2020; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Yosso et al., 2009). The process of writing each testimonio was an emotional and reflexive journey that allowed me to deeply connect with the testimonialistas' stories while reflecting on my own experiences. As a result, I internalized their experiences as my own.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION

I purposely selected information-rich testimonialistas who would help answer the research question by discovering, understanding, and reflecting on their experiences (Creswell, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I began the recruitment efforts upon approval of the dissertation proposal from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), although the research was deemed as not meeting the definition of human subject research. Given the focus on gender, race, dissertation stage, and the COVID-19 pandemic influence, I created a screening questionnaire (Appendix A) to identify testimonialistas who met the selection criteria. The selection criteria included: (1) identifying as a Chicana or Mexican-American, (2) having been involved in any of the Ed.D. dissertation stages, either capstone, dissertation research, or dissertation writing, and (3) having graduated from the doctoral program.

Although there is no concise number of participants for a qualitative research study (Creswell, 2009; Lichtman, 2013), the dynamic recruitment process allowed me to interview seven Ed.D. graduates. I began the recruitment efforts through convenience sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) by reaching out to female colleagues within my Ed.D. cohort who may meet the selection criteria after receiving the IRB letter.

Through convenience sampling, I was able to confirm one participant. Although qualitative research can be limited to a single participant, I sought to increase the number of participants to provide sufficient opportunity to identify themes within each individual participant and carry out cross-case analysis (Creswell, 2009; Lichtman, 2013). Therefore, as a second recruitment strategy, I approached my dissertation chair for assistance with recruiting potential testimonialistas who meet the selection criteria. Upon receiving potential candidates' email addresses, I sent individual recruitment emails. All recruitment emails included a brief description of the research and my contact information. The second recruitment approach allowed me to secure two additional participants.

Although I planned the recruitment strategies, the recruitment process came alive and shifted into snowball sampling. The change happened after one of the testimonialistas referred me to other individuals who met the selection criteria (Lichtman, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, snowball sampling became the third recruitment strategy, which helped me identify four more candidates for this research study.

Once potential testimonialistas showed interest in participating in the study, I provided them with an online screening questionnaire using Qualtrics XM, a password-protected web-based software, that was emailed to potential testimonialistas using their preferred email address. Even though the research focuses on gender, race, dissertation stage, and the COVID-19 pandemic influence, the Qualtrics XM questionnaire collected additional information from potential testimonialistas, such as age group, living arrangements, languages known, and employment status (Appendix B). Since I am not interested in generalizing participants' experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I did not use this information as an exclusion criterion. On the contrary, this information was collected in response to the dynamic and emergent nature of the qualitative design

(Creswell, 2009) hoping that my findings would make this information useful in some way and to inform about the testimonialistas profiles.

All testimonialistas self-identified as women, Mexican, Mexican-American, or Chicana and were conducting dissertation work in the Ed.D. program at the time the COVID-19 pandemic broke. Below is a chart illustrating participants' age group, living arrangements, employment status, language spoken at home, and year of graduation to provide a more robust profile.

Table 3.1

Table 3.1: Participant Demographics.

Pseudonym	Age group	Living arrangements	Employment status	Language spoken at home	Graduation year
Lydia	45-54	Living alone	Employed, working 40 or more hours per week	English	2021
Dolores	65-over	Living alone	Retired	English	2023
Elena	45-54	Living with nonfamily members	Employed, working 40 or more hours per week	English	2023
Sophia	35-44	Living alone	Employed, working 40 or more hours per week	English	2020
Estela	35-44	Living with children	Employed, working 40 or more hours per week	English	2022
Sophia	45-54	Living with children, Living with immediate family	Employed, working 40 or more hours per week	English	2022
Maria	35-44	Living alone	Employed, working 40 or more hours per week	Spanish	2021

SETTING OF THE STUDY

The research took place at an institution of higher education located on the United States–Mexico border, specifically on the El Paso-Juárez border. The university has a predominantly Hispanic student population accounting for 84% of the student body (The University of Texas at El Paso, n.d.a). Although I did not have specific expectations for how the geographic location of

the university would affect or influence this research, it is worthwhile to address the research context. El Paso, Texas, is located between two countries (the United States and Mexico) and three states (Texas, Chihuahua, and New Mexico) which form the largest bilingual and binational workforce in the Western Hemisphere called the Borderplex (City of El Paso, 2022). As soon as the COVID-19 pandemic was declared, the university converted all courses to a distance learning modality and provided its community with distance learning tools such as Zoom and Blackboard Collaborate to support students, faculty, and staff (The University of Texas at El Paso, n.d.b). Additionally, the Ed.D. degree program offered at the institution where the research took place is particularly unique as it emphasizes educational topics related to the characteristics and needs of the United States-Mexico border, provides students with a culturally and linguistically diverse setting, and follows a cohort model throughout the student's academic journey (The University of Texas at El Paso, n.d.c).

METHODS FOR DATA COLLECTION

After receiving the university's institutional review board approval, I scheduled one interview per participant lasting between forty minutes up to two hours, depending on the testimonialistas' availability. During the interviews, I dedicated ample time to accomplish the following: I introduced the research and myself and aimed for the testimonialistas to fully understand the purpose and context of the study. Also, I wanted the testimonialistas to be at ease and develop a relationship based on trust that leads to a meaningful conversation and useful data (Lichtman, 2013). In addition, during the process of collecting testimonios, I actively engaged with the participants, demonstrating active listening as they shared their experiences. I encouraged them to provide comprehensive details, and I supplemented the interviews with additional questions as needed.

The first interview was through the video conferencing platform called Zoom, but I later switched to another platform called WebEx. I was not aware that the Zoom student version provided by the university where the study was conducted only allowed for 45-minute sessions. Despite the time restriction, I was able to cover all the questions in the allotted time, and the participant kindly offered to meet again in case there were additional questions. The remaining interviews were conducted on WebEx without any issues or time constraints. I was able to spend quality time with each participant, gathering valuable information for transcription and reflection on their experiences (Etikan et al., 2016). During the interview stage, I consciously informed testimonialistas about the IRB's decision to classify the research as not meeting the definition of human subject research and encouraged them to ask questions about the study.

The utilization of audio-recording technology played a crucial role in transcribing the interviews. It provided me with the opportunity to revisit the recordings, carefully listen to the participants' testimonios, and meticulously create the transcripts for subsequent analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As the researcher, I acknowledge my responsibility to treat participants' information with the highest level of confidentiality (Lichtman, 2013); therefore, through Zoom and WebEx, I created password-protected virtual sessions that were only shared with each individual testimonialista. In addition, I used a password-protected phone to record the interviews using the Voice Recorder application. Furthermore, pseudonyms were created and assigned during the recruitment stage to protect the identities of the participants. These pseudonyms were also used during the data collection and data analysis stages to ensure anonymity. Additionally, names and other identifiers were altered or removed to protect participants' privacy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, I transferred each audio file to a password-protected laptop as soon as the

interviews concluded. I consider it important to highlight that I am the only one with access to both the cellphone and laptop.

Transcripts were created using a voice recognition software called Dictate. Consequently, to guarantee the accuracy of each transcription, I carefully listened to the recordings multiple times, took detailed notes, and reflected on each participant's testimonio. This process of writing memos and capturing my thoughts and feelings was essential in ensuring the quality of the transcriptions. The fragments of the testimonios presented in Chapter four are mostly verbatim; however, edits were made exclusively to include proper transitions and deletion of filler words such as "um," "so," "you know," "I guess," and "like." Throughout the study, I was very cautious in using testimonio as a venue to reflect on the participants' stories without victimizing them and accurately capturing their realities, agency, and the complexity of each participant's identities.

METHODS FOR DATA ANALYSIS

In qualitative research, the process of data analysis requires the researcher to examine and make sense of the data collected through its continuous exploration and interpretation (Creswell, 2009). The collection, analysis, and interpretation of qualitative documents, such as transcripts, memos, reflections, audio, and visual materials, happen concurrently; therefore, these simultaneous processes allow the researcher to make informed decisions on how to proceed further with the ongoing research and structure the final report (Creswell, 2009; Lichtman, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Following this approach, the researcher seeks to code the data by looking for general concepts and themes (Creswell, 2009). Depending on the researcher's qualitative research approach, the analysis of the data may go further to include additional steps to resemble a specific qualitative research methodology (Creswell, 2009; Lichtman, 2013). In this case, this qualitative research grounded in testimonio methodology within a Chicana feminist epistemology required

me to frame questions in a way that placed Chicanas on the central stage of the research through the exploration of their lived experiences (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Therefore, the research questions sought to build solidarity and reflect on peoples' cultures and processes that illustrate how Chicanas experience life and academic pursuits (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Flores Carmona, 2014; Pérez Huber, 2009). Additionally, the data analysis process required me to work closely with the testimonialistas to bring attention to their experiences and validate their role as legitimate holders and creators of values, attitudes, interests, skills, and knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Pérez Huber, 2009).

The data analysis process started right after I concluded the first interview. Following Creswell's (2009) steps for data analysis, I transcribed the data as soon as each interview concluded. Subsequently, I worked closely with the testimonialistas by sharing their manuscripts with them while seeking feedback, validating their stories, and providing an opportunity for reflection (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Gutierrez et al., 2022). After finalizing each transcript, I read the data as a whole to get a general sense of the information and wrote in the margins my comments, memos, and reflections (Creswell, 2009). During the research analysis process, as a Chicana scholar, I strove to create a genuine connection with the testimonialistas (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Furthermore, my personal and professional experience, along with the existing literature and the research process itself, were crucial elements in interpreting the data to what Delgado Bernal (1998) defines as cultural intuition.

Coding

Analyzing qualitative data is an inductive process where, in order to make sense of the data, researchers generate themes through an interactive process of coding and re-coding the data (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Coding is the process of taking pieces of information

and assigning a meaning to them that will help the researcher answer the research question, such as words, phrases, or the participant's own words (Lichtman, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, the coding process is iterative in nature because it continues until all interviews have been coded and re-coded (Lichtman, 2013). After I transcribed each testimonio, I started the initial coding by assigning open codes to the data (Lichtman, 2013), and I continued this iterative process until all seven interviews were coded (Creswell, 2009). Once I concluded the initial coding, I proceeded with reviewing the codes and merging overlapping and redundant codes (Lichtman, 2013).

I organized the codes into hierarchical categories (Lichtman, 2013), taking into consideration that the Chicana feminist framework recognizes Chicanas' life experiences while integrating family, class, immigration, language, religion, and ethnic backgrounds as part of Chicanas' educational experiences (Calderón et al., 2012; Carrillo & Dean, 2020; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). Therefore, the following categories emerged: personal background, challenges, motivations, doctoral journey, dissertation work, professional life, personal life, identity, feelings, effects of COVID-19 in daily life, strategies for success, and reflections. To finalize the analysis, I used the coding process to generate key concepts or themes that helped me interpret and make sense of the data in a meaningful way (Creswell, 2009; Lichtman, 2013). Therefore, all the categories merged into the following themes, which represent my findings: (1) navigating responsibilities, (2) support systems, and (3) sense of purpose.

POSITIONALITY AND SUBJECTIVITY

An important characteristic of qualitative inquiry is that researchers are interested in exploring how participants make sense of their experiences and seek to interpret these experiences through theoretical frameworks while bringing to the interpretation process their own biases or

subjectivities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Therefore, it is crucial for a qualitative researcher to identify and be open about the bias they bring to the research and clarify how they may influence the collection and interpretation of the data instead of eliminating these subjectivities (Creswell, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I strongly agree with Lichtman (2013) as she states, "Researchers should not try to remain outside the system. They need not try to achieve objectivity because that is an assumption of quantitative research and not qualitative research" (p. 295). Through self-reflection, qualitative researchers must openly acknowledge how their findings and interpretations are shaped by their personal perspectives and subjectivities (Creswell, 2009; Lichtman, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

As a result, as a qualitative researcher, I consider it important to acknowledge my positionality and subjectivity, which have been crucial throughout the data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The research question originated from my personal experience as a first-generation Mexican immigrant doctoral student navigating my responsibilities amidst the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic while making sense of the global crisis. Most importantly, my interest is driven by my desire to promote empowerment through the sharing of stories of perseverance, pride, and gratitude. I acknowledge that my personal experiences as a doctoral student of Mexican descent struggling with establishing a healthy work-life balance and engaging in scholarly work have influenced the interpretation of the data. Recognizing my positionality and subjectivity has allowed me to use my cultural intuition to interpret the data at a deeper level by giving the sensibility to understanding my testimonialistas' experiences (Delgado Bernal, 1998).

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, my role as an administrator at an institution of higher education became increasingly demanding. I experienced a sense of being overwhelmed by responsibilities and feelings of isolation and uncertainty. The sudden shift to a

virtual environment blurred the lines between my personal and professional life, all while balancing my own doctoral studies. As a third-year doctoral student accustomed to in-person classes, I had to quickly adapt to online learning and reconfigure my living space to create an improvised study and office area. Within the span of a week, my work, academic pursuits, and personal activities all took place within the confines of my home, leading to a profound sense of isolation and uncertainty about my ability to continue with my doctoral journey.

Summary

This chapter gave insight into the methodology, data collection, and analysis implemented to collect the testimonios from seven Chicana or Mexican-American female doctoral students regarding their academic journeys amid challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter detailed information on the research design, participant selection, research context, and data interpretation. Lastly, I described my research positionality and subjectivity. The findings of this study will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter, I present segments of the seven participants' testimonios who were juggling their various responsibilities, including dissertation work, while trying to make sense of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each testimonialista offers reflective insights into their academic journey and professional and personal experiences during these uncertain times. The findings of this study were organized into three themes that emerged from the data analysis: (1) navigating responsibilities, (2) support systems, and (3) sense of purpose. The first concept discusses how doctoral students negotiated multiple identities and roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second concept, support systems, alludes to the factors that helped testimonialistas complete their doctoral program. The last concept, sense of purpose, refers to the drive that guided participants' academic success.

NAVIGATING RESPONSIBILITIES

In this study, identity pertains to the self-identification of racial or ethnic group, gender, and first-generation college student identity. All testimonialistas self-identified as first-generation college students and as Mexican, Mexican-American, or Chicana. Additionally, multiple roles were defined as the diverse responsibilities the testimonialistas had in their lives by the time the pandemic was declared. Some of the multiple roles mentioned in participants' interviews were the following: being a mother, daughter, sister, spouse, solo provider, teacher, professor, administrator, lecturer, doctoral student, scholar-practitioner, caregiver, leader, and advisor. Additionally, at the time, all testimonialistas were involved in one of the Ed.D. dissertation stages, either the capstone, dissertation research, or dissertation writing. The following section shows how testimonialistas made sense of their roles and negotiated their responsibilities.

Professional Responsibilities

The convergence of roles within a unified space instilled in scholar-practitioners a sense of ambiguity regarding the demarcation between the conclusion of professional duties and the transition to attending to academic responsibilities, for example Lydia stated:

> Before COVID, I had a routine already established that helped me navigate my busy lifestyle. I would drive to work, then to the university to attend in-person classes, and finally go back home to do homework or whatever I needed to do. When I was at work, I was at work. When I got home, I was at home. With COVID, these lines got blurred!

Lydia recalled that working in education got harder with the pandemic, and working remotely did not make her job any easier because life got lonelier:

> Actually, it became more work, harder work, a bigger burden The lines blurred between where work started and where work stopped because it was nonstop. From seven in the morning until dark at night, including the weekends. Work became kind of lonelier because everyone was stuck at home. There were times I had to stop working and focus on my studies. It was hard to take off that work hat and put on my student hat.

I shared with Lydia that I tried to compartmentalize my living space to have separate areas for office work, dissertation, and recreational activities. I was seeking to add a sense of separation among my responsibilities, to which Lydia followed:

> I had two piles of paperwork. I had my work pile, and then I had my study pile. By 6 o'clock, I would move my work pile and bring over my dissertation pile, but it was all at the same table.

Like Lydia, another four participants found it difficult to compartmentalize their living space as all personal, professional, and academic responsibilities happened in the same area, like their living

room or kitchen area. At the beginning of the pandemic, this situation aggravated feelings of ambiguity as they found it difficult to delineate when to stop working on their professional responsibilities and transition to their role as an Ed.D. student.

Aside from managing multiple professional responsibilities, testimonialistas had to quickly adapt to new technologies. For Dolores, the abrupt transition from an in-person work environment to online platforms translated into learning multiple systems and finding new ways of doing things. By March 2020, Dolores was juggling two jobs, teaching pre-K and working at a university, and taking two doctoral classes. Dolores described this juggling:

> It was very difficult because we were expected to learn a lot. Not just about online teaching, but also about the portal that the district was using which I had not gotten trained on it at all. Also, for college students, I had to create my lesson plans and learn to use the portal by myself while I was at home. It was very hard! As a professor, it was very easy to see that students were falling behind. It was difficult for me to deliver the information they needed to learn and for the students to be able to learn the material through Zoom.

Testimonialistas who had to transition from in-person to remote work faced new job responsibilities that emerged because of social distancing mandates and lockdowns. For example, Elena's biggest struggle was adapting to new responsibilities because her scope of work required her to create new policies and recommendations on keeping students and personnel safe while transitioning all activities to an online environment. Elena recalled her struggle at work:

> We needed to tackle things like, what are we going to do with the water fountains? Are we having water bottles everywhere? What are we going to do with kids coming in sick? How many days do they need to stay home? What are we going to do with physical education? Are we going to keep the playgrounds open?

These were all new challenges and responsibilities Elena had to navigate on top of her doctoral responsibilities, which required her to quickly adapt and take over new responsibilities, Elena stated:

> Everything happened very quickly! We had to put procedures in place for the kids. Once the kids were sent home, we needed to think about what is that the kids needed while being at home; what about laptops? What about hotspots? We all worked together to keep everybody safe once we saw that the pandemic was serious. All the chaos that followed after implementing lockdowns and social distancing mandates confirmed that I needed to put my dissertation aside. My dissertation is not that important because, along with my team, I was taking care of the district and the kids.

Furthermore, having interactions through live video due to school, work, or other reasons allowed people to have a glimpse into each other 's personal space. For participants, this felt invasive because there was no clear boundary indicating where one's personal space started, which Soraya captured by sharing:

> As a professor, I had to teach live courses from 8:30am to 3:30pm or 4:00pm. Most of the time I was sitting in front of the computer, and I had to be on camera interacting with students all day, Monday through Friday. During that time, our water pipe broke and our landlord did not want to repair it. Not having water during a pandemic is very cruel. We have kids. So, it was impossible to stay in that house without running water, clean water. We had to go to a hotel for a week. At some point, we could not afford that anymore and we went to stay with my mom for a while. When we were staying with her, she got COVID. That made me rearrange everything again because we had to get out of her house, then I would go to her house, and stay with her to care for her because she had been in the hospital.

> Thankfully, she was fine so she was able to go back home, but she had to be on oxygen. I would take turns with my sister like, I would stay with her a week and then my sister would stay with her the following week. I was traveling back and forth from her house to my house. I was teaching my classes from her house and the students would ask me "At what house are you right now? Which hotel are you in?" There were really personal things that I would never have wanted my students to know. My students got to see everything. My mom in the back or the family Christmas tree. Probably the students thought "La maestra es pobre" [The teacher is poor], "She is homeless or something." It was interesting because I would have never wanted them to see my house. That was a very personal thing. You are seeing other people's houses. You see their bedroom. You are seeing their living room. You could see everything that was happening in others ' houses. It felt like we were peeking into each other's personal lives.

For those participants who had to abruptly adapt from in-person interactions to the online world, the beginning of the pandemic made it difficult for them to open their personal space, such as their home, to incorporate their professional and academic work. Maria, who at the time was living by herself, captured this sentiment by stating:

> It was difficult for me because when we were sent home, my home was not for dissertation, school, or work. My home was for personal time. Going from no longer having an office, no longer having a classroom, and now my house has become a little bit of everything, was very difficult. You are going to laugh at me because this is how I had to set up my house. One room was my office; this room was for work only. In another room, I had my personal laptop; it was for personal stuff. My balcony became a kind of my classroom/dissertation area. I refused to bring work or dissertation items into the living room, kitchen area, or

> dining room. Initially, I felt as if it became an invasion and I could not stop or differentiate when I needed to stop working. I could not sustain this situation for a long time. After a while, I burned myself out to a point where I did not have free time or personal time.

In comparison to Maria, who abruptly transitioned her professional responsibilities to an online environment, Sophia and Estela had slightly different experiences as they were already working remotely before the pandemic was declared. For example, Sophia stated:

> It was interesting because in terms of the pandemic impacting my work life, I was already working as a professor for an online program. I was already working from home, periodically going to the university for meetings or other business. When the pandemic hit and everybody was scrambling to transition into online environments or understanding how an online program looks like, whether in K-12 or higher education, for me, it felt like the work continued without interruption. Overall, the online world was very familiar to us. In many ways, this situation felt like a godsend because my work life remained normal. Despite everything else around me, such as feelings of uncertainty, work for me continued to be steady.

Moreover, Estela shared a similar sentiment, as she had already been working asynchronously before the pandemic started.

> I was fortunate enough to be teaching online for (…). I was doing my grading and work activities during the day while the kids were at the table or at their desks in their room taking their classes. I was already in that mode of teaching online classes. I would work from home, make food for my kids, and then go pick them up or take them places. Then, when COVID hit, it was kind of the same work scenario for me.

Overall, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic posed challenges for the five participants whose professional roles transitioned from in-person to virtual interactions compared to those whose professional roles were already virtual before the pandemic was declared. This transition led to uncertainty about when to switch from their professional to their academic roles, the need to quickly learn new technologies, taking on new professional duties, loss of privacy, and a reduction in personal time.

Dissertation Work

Throughout the study, all testimonialistas mentioned that, for the most part, the COVID-19 pandemic did not change the isolating and independent nature of the dissertation work. Although minor adjustments were needed to their data collection, such as changing in-person interviews to virtual interviews, these changes did not halt the progress of their dissertations. To illustrate this experience, Lydia shared:

> At that point, I already had all my literature. I was on my own. I had all the books I needed to get and if I needed anything I would get it online. I did not really necessarily had to rearrange anything as far as where I got my study material because I had most of it already. Though, that is not any different than if COVID had not been there. I would have done everything online either way by that point. The greatest thing was doing the interviews on Zoom versus face-to-face. That was major for me though because I would wonder, how am I going to talk to these people and do my interviews? It ended up being something relatively easy. I was able to build up enough rapport with my stakeholders that when I emailed them and called them, they were willing to get on Zoom and do the interviews there. I was really fortunate that they were always willing to help me out and willing to give up their time.

Aside from minor changes to their dissertation work, Dolores talked about the issues she had while trying to get a hold of her dissertation chairs which created feelings of isolation and lack of guidance, she stated:

> I used to work at (…), so I was able to meet with my professors frequently. The thing is that, when I really needed the help, when I was working on my Capstone, we were home already. Right at the Capstone phase that is when we lost touch. I would send my paper for review, but I would not get responses for months. During COVID, I was really on my own. From having access to my professors to only communicating sporadically with them was worrisome because I was still deciding on my dissertation topic. At that time, I knew I was doing qualitative research for my dissertation, but I was unsure about the topic or what framework I wanted to use. Because I was having issues communicating with my professors, I bought books to learn more about qualitative research. I was reading a lot. Also, I did not know how everybody else was doing in my cohort, I was isolated. We lost track of one another. I did not have that support either. You are the first one that I know of that is moving forward. We were a cohort, so we were able to support each other, but little by little, we started working on silos.

Although participants agreed the pandemic did not change the nature of the dissertation work, Sophia reflected on how the dissertation lost its importance as something of a greater magnitude was impacting the world and prompting people to reevaluate their priorities:

> That spring semester, right before COVID hit, I was in the process of conducting my interviews. I had scheduled interviews right after spring break of 2020. Once people realized we were not going back to school, some of my interviews got canceled. I think because my participants were very much focused on making sense of the situation. They

were focused on other things, maybe survival. Maybe figuring out what school would look like for kids in the post-COVID spring break. At some point, looking at the big picture, the dissertation, the interviews, all of it seemed to lose its meaning.

Although Sophia pondered the importance of the dissertation work, the lockdowns helped her focus on writing without interruptions as commuting time and other activities were eliminated. She recalled:

> During the pandemic, it was an interesting time because you were at home 24/7. For me, finishing the dissertation in that spring semester—it really was lockdown. Again, at work, nothing changed because the structure was already there. The way we delivered classes and mentored students was already in place, and that continued without interruptions. You were not spending time traveling back and forth or going from one place to another, like going grocery shopping. You were not losing time of your day because you were stuck at home. In many ways, that also gave me more time to be able to work on the dissertation. I am trying to take myself back to that time, and I recall everything became just this one long day. Again, because we were not going anywhere, every day was sort of the same thing.

Participants shared that the progress of their dissertations was not hindered by the pandemic. However, minor adjustments had to be made to their data collection methods in order to conform with the social distancing mandates and lockdowns. Also, the pandemic prompted them to consider the relevance of their dissertations in the context of the broader situation, raising themes related to life and death. Furthermore, the precautionary measures forced testimonialistas to be at home and dedicate more time to working on their dissertations.

Family Responsibilities

For those testimonialistas who identified as married or mothers, this study indicated that despite navigating multiple roles, the pandemic allowed them to strengthen their family bonds while managing their numerous responsibilities. For example, Estela took advantage of the lockdowns and spent more time with her children, as she described:

> My spouse was really instrumental because everyone was at home, so we got to share all the responsibilities. We were all at home and the kids were able to pitch in whenever it came to household activities. For example, I taught them how to cook. We would learn how to cook something new every day, and sooner or later, they were helping us cook even though they were little. We would do spaghetti, sopa [soup], or eggs. The kids really liked to cook. I taught them recipes and in the process, they were helping me. We taught them how to wash clothes. The lockdown was a good time to have one-on-one time with the children, teach them things, and, in the process, make them independent enough so that I could finish my research and write the dissertation. I would be at the kitchen table, sometimes writing till one or two in the morning if I could not sleep sometimes three in the morning. They were asleep at that time, but they would wake up sometimes in the middle of the night and just sit with me or read a book or something. They understood and knew the urgency and the importance of my work. We were all together, and if my kids had questions, they would ask either me or my spouse. We were studying together.

Estela reflected on her experience of taking over most of the caring and household responsibilities as the nature of her work allowed for this to happen:

> Mainly because my spouse had to teach students virtually, but she had to be on camera with them all day like she was at school with them. She would give them little breaks, but

> for every one of her classes, she had to stay online with them to lecture them or go over assignments. For me, my work and everything related to it was asynchronous. My students had already registered for asynchronous classes. Then, we did not have any in-person or formal meetings. I would just give them the modules to work on or have virtual lectures. I would record myself or do some kind of interactive lecturing. On the other hand, my spouse had to be on camera all day. Here is where I would pick up and keep an eye on the kids, keep an eye on the little one, but when she would finish the school day, we would all help each other that way. That is when I would turn around and do my research.

On the other hand, Maria, who identified as not having children nor being married, found herself living in isolation and sought ways to maintain family relationships while balancing intersecting responsibilities, she shared:

> I live alone! That is one of the things that made the pandemic even harder for me. Going from me being a people person, always reaching out for that personal connection, and things of that nature, to having zero was very difficult to sustain. It got to the point where I decided to leave El Paso and go home to my family. My family currently lives in Mississippi, so I literally went there. Initially, I was going to be there only for a couple of weeks, but then I thought "I am already here, I am working, I am definitely not allowed to go back to my office." So, I asked my supervisor if I would be able to work from my parents' home and my supervisor was fine with it. I was able to be successful virtually although I found it a little bit difficult to go back to studying, writing, and such. Even though it was mainly writing.

The nature of the testimonialistas' living arrangements and family dynamics, such as being married, having children, and living with family members, played a crucial role in how participants experienced the pandemic.

Emotional Labor

Even though the majority of the testimonialistas participating in this study did not identify as family caregivers, they experienced their students' need for community connections and emotional support as professors and teachers. For example, Sophia shared her experience:

> During the pandemic, there was an increased need for emotional support. As a professor, it was challenging to try to maintain a somewhat neutral and calm demeanor while trying to get your students through stressful moments. Whereas, in reality, in your own life, as professors, we were also experiencing the pandemic and all the stressors that came with it. This was not a localized crisis that happened at a specific campus. This was something that we all went through. The literature talks about emotional labor and during the pandemic, there was so much of that. As a professor, you were setting yourself aside as an individual experiencing COVID in order to help students cope with stressful moments, whether it was a real crisis, emotional crisis, something about an assignment, or related to the pandemic. During the pandemic, students needed additional or a different kind of support. Students would share feelings of isolation and unbalance in the different spheres of their lives.

When reflecting on her experiences as a professor providing emotional support to students, Sophia felt that the expectation to provide this level of support was not due to her gender or identity, but rather because of her role as a professor. Sophia shared:

> The context of the pandemic raised questions for our students about things that they had not dealt with before. Now we were dealing with family members getting sick or students

> not knowing if they were going to be fine. Students were dealing with topics that had to do with life and death. Therefore, I think the situation necessitated a different kind of mentoring that was more nurturing in fact. The humanity in all of us surfaced and our interactions changed because of that. I cannot say that I was emotionally supporting students because I am a woman or because I am a Chicana. At least in my experience, that may have gone out of the window for me. The pandemic was global. It was more about our shared humanity. The pandemic was a unique context that touched on life and death situations. The pandemic was an equalizer that surfaced the need for all people to deal with emotions and stressors and to do things that they did not do in their ordinary pre-pandemic context.

Similar to Sophia's experience, the rest of the testimonialistas articulated comparable sentiments. They assumed emotional labor as their leadership roles mandated attending to the needs of students and colleagues, irrespective of their identity.

Leadership

Aside from emotional support, these scholar-practitioners faced the need to adapt their leadership practices to match their new responsibilities in their professional contexts. For example, Elena, who has an extensive background in health and education, guided her colleagues through this tumultuous time. She reflected on her experience:

> I am in the health field and student support services, so my team and I know more about health, mental health, and physical health. My responsibility was to take care of everybody. As a leader, I would help teachers develop lesson plans and give them different ideas to implement on their campus. As the content expert, I would guide them as much as I could, but they are the experts when it comes to knowing their campus. So, they would implement

> the lesson plans as they felt was best for their campus. I felt like I led by sharing responsibilities, and that helped me with all the other responsibilities that were thrown at me. Sharing responsibilities and valuing their knowledge helped me because they felt valued and supported. My responsibilities changed, but I am a leader and I had to adapt accordingly.

As I have discussed, the first theme identified in this study was navigating responsibilities, which led to the five sub-themes I illustrated above: professional responsibilities, dissertation work, family responsibilities, emotional labor, and leadership. The second theme was support systems, which is discussed below.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

The study revealed that testimonialistas relied on a diverse array of support systems that aided them in successfully navigating the Ed.D. program, its dissertation components, and the unique challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The support described in the testimonios encompassed both institutional and non-institutional forms of support. When referring to institutional support, I am specifically referring to cohort members, advisors, professors or dissertation chairs. In comparison, non-institutional support refers to parents, children, and spouses who provided the emotional support needed for testimonialistas to work on their dissertation.

Institutional Support

Testimonialistas alluded to the positive impact the active involvement of cohort members, professors, and dissertation chairs had on their academic success by providing feedback, guidance, and additional research material. Maria described the important role her cohort colleagues played on her entire academic journey, regardless of the pandemic:

> Since the introduction to the doctoral program, all in my cohort, we decided to establish a close cohort. When the pandemic was declared, we went from being a tight-knit family to being separated from each other. Even with the separation, we decided to still keep each other accountable. Before COVID, we would get together to write, do research, or whatever we need to do. Then, when COVID hit, we had to stop that, and we decided to implement virtual meetups. Although that became a little bit more difficult because this interaction became just like another screen opened up on our computer. We were so busy with a lot of work, so it became more of an intrusion for us. It became a little bit difficult for us to navigate this situation, but at the end of the day, we were still supporting one another in one way or the other.

Sophia, like Maria, expressed a similar sentiment when conveying the support she received from her cohort:

> The cohort structure helped us make progress in a timely manner. As the dissertation phase can be isolating, check-ins from cohort members who are experiencing the same thing is emotionally helpful. Even though your family may support you, they are outsiders to the doctoral experience who may not understand what a doctoral degree entails. Your cohort members understand how exhausting it is to get out of your full-time work and then read and write. Even though we all had different commitments and schedules, we checked in with each other regularly and provided the support and encouragement we needed more so after the pandemic was declared. It is interesting because I wonder what made our cohort successful or what allowed us to build a strong cohort before and after the pandemic. Before the pandemic, since the classes were in the evenings and people were coming from work, every class, someone would bring food, and everyone would take turns. The majority

> of the students were Mexican, and thinking about culture, in Mexican culture, food unites people. So, we were breaking bread together. I am not sure if the simple act of sharing meals brought us together and this unity persisted all throughout.

In addition to cohort support, testimonialistas expressed how crucial the support received from their advisors, professors, or dissertation chairs was to their academic success by being active agents during the pandemic. Soraya provided examples of this support:

> With my advisor, we would meet on Zoom once or twice a week. She would give me the guidance I needed. She would suggest me to read articles or search for specific things. Everything was online for a while because of the pandemic, on Zoom. We did not ever see each other in person. Aside to meeting with me virtually, she had Zoom sessions with other students who did not have an advisor. She just picked up a bunch of us who did not have a clear path to finishing. She went over the degree plan and kind of explained what we needed to do. Her guidance and structure helped me meet all the deadlines and graduate. Unfortunately, in the beginning, we both had different ideas about my dissertation. We kind of did not agree. Trying to combine these two ideas of what I thought it should be and what she thought was appropriate was really tough. Mainly because we were online. We could not even sit down, use a whiteboard, or something like that. We were online and we had miscommunications where I thought she meant something, and she thought I meant something else. You think that because you are talking to someone on video you understand what they are saying or what they mean, but I found out that that was a big issue as far as how she communicates and how I communicate.

Similarly, Sophia mentioned how crucial the support and guidance from her dissertation chair was in helping her persist when she felt the dissertation work was losing importance:

> My chair was a critical component to finishing the doctoral program. I was fortunate enough to have a dissertation chair that was active and involved. My chair provided resources, readings, and kept me focused. Even though they, as professors, were also going through the pandemic, my chair took the time to say "Hey, I looked at this data." Having these conversations even when the work did not seem to matter was very helpful to me. My chair was critical at providing the support that allowed me to continue focusing on the dissertation. I do not know if that was the experience for everybody. For example, if you had a chair that all of a sudden had school-age children at home doing remote learning or a husband at home, or if they got sick, who knows what that would have looked like!
>
> I remember having a conversation with my dissertation chair telling him that I did not know what to do because some of my interviews got canceled. I was wondering if I needed to put a pause on the dissertation. My chair was very good about saying, "No, we need to stay focused. You are going to write what you have." For me, that was helpful. His guidance helped me recenter.

Although the data indicates that, for the most part, the testimonialistas had positive interactions with their professors and dissertation chairs, there were instances in which they experienced challenges receiving the support they needed because of the struggles faculty were experiencing due to the pandemic. Dolores shared an example of this:

> The pandemic was emotionally challenging, and people needed support all around. It was weird because one of my mentors was taking care of her mother, so she would want to meet with me late at night. Most of the time we were not really doing much about my paper and we would talk about other things. It was very hard! I was very tired! I became more like a friend than a student. Our meetings became casual conversations that had nothing to

> do with my dissertation. I was aware of the challenges my mentor was experiencing because of the pandemic and I was appreciative of her time. I did not want anybody to feel unappreciated and I would thank her for meeting with me.

The level of involvement of cohort members, dissertation chairs, professors, or mentors was instrumental in the academic journey of these participants regardless of the pandemic status. However, communication with these agents changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Non-institutional Support

Testimonialistas expressed that before and during the pandemic, the support provided by parents, significant others, or children was key for their academic pursuits. For example, Lydia kindly talked about her mother and how she always provided Lydia with her support:

> Regardless whether the pandemic was a thing or not, my mom was always very supportive. She never told me "No, you cannot do this because you have to take care of me." I have been very fortunate because I know not everyone gets that same level of support. Even though my mom was from Mexico, she became naturalized, she was really ahead of her time. She never ever pressured me to have kids or to get married. She would say things like "You do you, you do your life, I will always support you." I know not every family is like that, but I've been fortunate that my mom was completely supportive. Even my dad when he was around, was completely supportive of what I did and how I did it. I do feel like an outlier. I do feel like that is not the norm. In our culture, the Mexican culture, there are expectations to fulfill, but I feel blessed that my parents were not like that. For all of us, there are four girls in the family, everyone lives and leads their own life.

Another example of the support provided by family is Soraya's experience. For Soraya, her primary source of support was her spouse and kids:

> From six to midnight is when I would do my doctoral work. This is when I would read articles, do my annotations, or research. I started doing it every day, from 6 to 12. I would tell everyone "During that time do not talk to me!" We were all in the same house, we only had one kitchen table, and everybody used that kitchen table for work or homework. At that time, it would tell my kids "Ok, you got to go to your room, this is my time to get to work." During the pandemic, this gave me a lot of structure because there was nothing else that I need to focus on. The dissertation was the only thing I was focusing on. I was trying really hard to meet the deadline. So, my kids support me by not talking to me from 6 to 12 every day. They respected my time, even though it was tough because they are little kids! They needed things and still we needed to do the laundry, do the dishwasher, still we had to do regular things, and so it was really tough to try to make them understand. Also, my wife helped me every single day in some way. Whether sending me an article, making dinner, or whatever. She provided me with the emotional support I needed because until the end I doubted myself, until the day I defended. I had a voice in my mind that was telling me that something was going to happen and I was not going to be able to do it. My wife would tell me "You have spent so much time reading, writing, researching, doing all this stuff, but if you do not believe in it, then just stop now. But I know you are not going to be satisfied with yourself if you give up!"

The final theme was sense of purpose, which is discussed next.

SENSE OF PURPOSE

The last concept refers to participants' sense of purpose in connection to doctoral degree persistence and future aspirations. Upon exploring their sense of purpose in academia, several underlying themes emerged, including participants' commitment to self, family, and community.

Commitment to Self

Although the COVID-19 pandemic added challenges to testimonialistas' doctoral work, jobs, and home-life balance, they persisted and graduated from the Ed.D. program. All testimonialistas found a profound commitment to self that drove them to the finish line. For Lydia, the culmination of her doctoral journey was guided by her mental strength and awareness of her emotions, as she explained:

> What helped me overcome the pandemic and graduate was that I do not rely on my feelings because feelings can be very fickle. I allowed myself to embrace my feelings, but think to myself, "Okay, you have been kind of sad, you have been kind of doubting yourself, and you need to snap out of it!" I did a lot of self-talk, whether it is internal or just by saying out loud "Ya! [enough] Focus! Focus!" I have always done that, more so during COVID, I would allow myself to feel down and frustrated, but after a while, I would make the decision that it was time to focus and get things done. I cannot rely on my feelings because my feelings would have told me that I was tired and that I would never going to get the dissertation done. I remember thinking to myself, "I have the ability to do it! I have already done all the classes. I have already done all the preparation. I have already taken all the steps that have led me to the point where I am right now." All I needed to do was dig in and focus a little bit more and, eventually, I arrived to the place where my theoretical framework made sense, my questions all lined up with my framework. Everything came together, but I had to make the decision that "Yes, I have the ability to do it. I just need to stop feeling sorry for myself and get to work."

Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, participants strengthened their commitment to caring for themselves by nurturing their bodies and minds. Elena described how she took this time and used it to her advantage:

> When COVID hit, I felt like now I had time for just me. I really enjoyed the COVID lockdowns. I was at home completely by myself. My son was already old enough and he had moved out to college. I started with the doctoral program in 2011; then my son was either in elementary or middle school. He graduated from high school in 2018 and moved out to attend (…). I was by myself at the house. It was very nice because I had more time for myself. I did a lot of self-care, which I think comes from my health background. The pandemic gave me the opportunity to take care of myself and also gave me the peace and focus to work on my dissertation. In order to continue working on the dissertation I relied on my self-motivation and mental strength. Aside from the added work responsibilities, I think COVID did not really matter because the dissertation is something that you do by yourself. Also, my last two mentors were women and Chicanas so I saw myself in them. I knew I belonged in an academic space.

In addition to commitment to self, other testimonialistas expressed that they persevered in their doctoral pursuit because they wanted to be an example for their kids or because the doctoral degree would provide them with better professional opportunities that would benefit the whole family.

Commitment to Family

Estela's academic journey was motivated by her love for her family and her desire to provide for them, as well as her goal of advancing her professional career. Despite the additional family-related responsibilities brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, this situation did not prevent her from completing her doctoral program:

> In the midst of the pandemic and my doctoral journey, my purpose for success was guided by my desire to provide for my kids through a fulfilling career beyond being a lecturer. I did it for my family. While teaching online is a rewarding career, I knew that it was not what I wanted for the long term. Being a lecturer is a wonderful and gratifying career for many people, but I wanted to explore other opportunities and take the next step in my professional career. If I had not finished my doctoral degree, I would have happily continued in my lecturing position. However, I wanted more, I wanted to give to my family more, and I wanted to return to face-to-face instruction and apply for administrative roles at other universities. During the pandemic, I had to be very conscious that the pandemic was perfect for me to finish. If I did not finish right there and then, then I was going to be a lecture for the rest of my life, and I was ready for another position.

Like Estela, Soraya expressed similar sentiments related to her family and her motivations to finish her doctoral journey:

> Right before I defended my dissertation, I had really pessimistic thoughts. These types or intrusive thoughts are hurtful. I snapped out of it because I thought about my daughters. My daughters are looking at me and they are going to see that I gave up and I ran out of time. That really motivated me to keep working on my dissertation. At the time, they were too little to understand what I was doing, but this thought motivated me every night because I was super tired! I did not want to stay on the computer for five or six hours, but I did it! I did not want them to see that I gave up because then, I thought, they are going to give up in their life! I do not want my daughters to give up. I do not want them to do that. I did not want to set that example. My immediate family gave me the purpose. They gave me the perspective of why I was doing the Ed.D.

Furthermore, others stated the purpose of obtaining a doctoral degree was to be better prepared to be of service to other first-generation college students and the advancement of their community.

Commitment to Community

Sophia emphasized the significance of community involvement and expressed that achieving an Ed.D. was an accomplishment that extended beyond herself. To her, earning a doctoral degree represents the strength demonstrated by the Mexican or Mexican-American community in overcoming challenges:

> I reflected on the pandemic experience and how people persisted throughout this time. Thinking about the Mexican or Mexican-American community, no matter what gets thrown at people. No matter what people are facing. They just push through and sometimes do not even have time to complain about things or seek mental health. You do not even have time to sit and reflect on things that are happening in your life. You just have to go. You just have to move. You just have to keep going. You just have to do the things that you have to do. In my opinion, that level of persistence existed during the pandemic. In our community, here in El Paso, among Latinas, there are not a lot of us pursuing Ed.D.s, other doctoral, or masters programs. Then understanding that a graduate degree is a privilege, I felt committed to not waste the opportunity. I do not have the luxury to waste it, I have a responsibility to myself, my family, my community. I would think, "The fact that you are sitting in this classroom, echale ganas [give it all you have got], get it done!" For me, success was not attributed to a strategy. For me success is linked to my values, philosophies, personal motivations, or reasons. While thinking about my family, I want my own family, my nieces, to see themselves reflected in academic spaces. Not to say that I want them to follow my footsteps, but for them to see that, if they want, they too belong in

> these educational spaces. To show my nieces that it is possible! They need to know what it sounds like. They need to know what it feels like. What it means to be a doctor. What it means to do graduate work.

Similarly to Sophia, Soraya expressed that graduating from the Ed.D. program would provide her with the credentials needed to advocate for students' success, in particular for first-generation college students. Soraya stated:

> Aside from my daughters, another source of purpose and motivation for me was the desire to use my degree to make an impact on the community, the education community. For example, as a facilitator in the district, I feel that by writing the curriculum, I am making a significant impact on students. She stated, "To me that is the degree working for me. It is taking me to the point where I feel I can make the most impact on the students. That was the goal, I want to be that teacher, that educator, that makes a change in someone's mind through education. Gaining knowledge, that is the goal! When you have knowledge then you are a rich person, and no one can ever take that away from you. I am a first-generation student, and at the time, I did not know how a doctoral program worked. I just knew that I had to take courses, and I did not know what to do after that. So, considering my struggles, I want to share my knowledge and experience with other first-generation students to ease their journey. They do not have to make the same mistakes that I did because they would know better. They can get further than I did! They can do better than I did!

Future Aspirations

Participants also expressed their sense of purpose by describing their future aspirations. For instance, Dolores had very specific plans that helped her persevere despite feeling isolated or struggling to receive the support she needed during the pandemic:

I want to go out there and start training principals. I am also thinking about writing a book that would help principals evaluate pre-K teachers. I want to put something together that guides them and tells them what to look for. I have not gotten to the finish line. I am determined to use my experiences to make a positive impact and inspire others to achieve their goals. I want to create change. My goal is to train principals to become LatCrit (Latina/o Critical Race Theory) Instructional Leaders by addressing students' needs instead of solely relying on test scores. As a Hispanic, I believe that schools need to take a holistic approach and reconsider maternal wealth as a valuable asset. As Hispanic women, we have always been viewed as caretakers, but we bring so much more to the table. Our ability to mother others is a strength that we can use to bring social justice to the areas we focus on.

Summary

In summary, this chapter presented the experiences of seven Chicana Ed.D. students who navigated their dissertation work during the COVID-19 pandemic. The themes that unfolded in this study indicated that testimonialistas navigated the pandemic while making sense of the convergence of their multiple roles into a single space. The roles and responsibilities that merged were professional work, doctoral activities, family responsibilities, emotional labor, and leadership roles. In addition, testimonialistas relied on two kinds of support systems to successfully accomplish their responsibilities: intuitional support and non-institutional support systems. Finally, they revealed a sense of purpose in connection to obtaining a doctoral degree and their future aspirations.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Conclusion

This final chapter will discuss findings, acknowledge the parameters of the study, provide ideas for future research, and offer recommendations for practice. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the testimonios of seven Chicana or Mexican-American female scholar-practitioners who were involved in any of the dissertation stages, such as capstone, dissertation research, or dissertation writing within the COVID-19 pandemic context. This study sought to explore, highlight, and add to the Chicana feminist literature by providing insights into how Chicana or Mexican-American female doctoral students navigated their academic journey amid unprecedented times. Listening to all participants' testimonios, I intended to contribute to the understanding of the Chicana or Mexican-American female experience through stories of perseverance, leadership, healing, and advocacy (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012). The overarching question guiding this research was the following: *What were the experiences of Chicana doctoral students in a Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) degree program during the dissertation phase within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to our society on a global scale (Raj Kumar et al., 2022), including lockdown measures that closed schools and businesses (United Nations, 2020; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021). For scholar-practitioners, the pandemic added a layer of complexity to their lives by pushing them to suddenly shift to remote or hybrid teaching and learning, while as school leaders, they were expected to ensure the safety of their schools and students, all while keeping up with their doctoral studies and taking care of themselves and their families (Brochu et al., 2021; Bukko & Dhesi,

2021; Capello, 2023). In the following section, I will discuss key insights relevant to my research findings.

Navigating Responsibilities

Testimonialistas did not experience the COVID-19 pandemic the same way. Some of the participants had to abruptly transition from working in an in-person environment to adapting to a professional and academic virtual space while navigating their personal activities. For some, this convergence of roles oftentimes required them to manage time constraints as they faced different intersecting responsibilities emanating from their roles as doctoral students, spouse/significant other, mother, and full-time employees. For those already working remotely, the pandemic did not signify an abrupt disruption of their professional activities as they were already used to a virtual space and had already made the necessary arrangements, such as home offices, to fulfill their roles.

There is literature that suggests that Chicana or Mexican-American female doctoral students, whose identities are deeply rooted in familismo, may experience an internal struggle between investing time in academic work or dedicating time to their family (Espino, 2016; Espinoza, 2010; Hernandez, 2015; López et al., 2022), as familismo emphasizes loyalty, close family relationships, community collaboration, collective behaviors, and choosing family over personal interests (Espino, 2016; Espinoza, 2010; Gutierrez et al., 2022; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020). Additionally, Bukko & Dhesi (2021) in their study indicated that during the pandemic, their participants, who were Ed.D. students, felt overwhelmed by working, studying, and living in the same space; these feelings were particularly exacerbated for those participants with childcare responsibilities. Contrary to the literature presented above, participants in this study who identified as mothers mentioned that the pandemic helped them strengthen their sense of familismo, which in turn helped them navigate their academic pursuits. Even one of these mothers,

Estela, described how she would spend more time with her children while teaching them how to do things independently, such as their breakfast or laundry. Additionally, Estela stated that she and her children began to study and cook together. As lockdown measures were imposed, these measures removed external distractions, such as time spent commuting to different places or extracurricular activities, which allowed participants to invest more time caring for their families and left them with time available to accomplish their dissertation work.

Testimonialistas who identified as living by themselves with no caregiving responsibilities fell into two categories: those who experienced feelings of isolation and sought ways to maintain family relationships and community connections (such as Maria, who moved cities to be closer to her family) and those who found solitude rather than loneliness and used the lockdowns as a time for self-care (such as Elena, who saw the pandemic as a time to care for herself by working out, eating nutritious food, or even cleaning up her dissertation articles and throwing away those that were not useful to her).

According to the literature, once doctoral students successfully complete their required coursework, they enter the dissertation stage (Donohue et al., 2021; Locke & Boyle, 2016), which is an isolating phase requiring students to direct their own learning and research through self-motivation and self-direction (Donohue et al., 2021; Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016). Taking into consideration this literature and the additional burdens the COVID-19 pandemic introduced to Ed.D. students, I expected my research findings to reveal a dissertation journey filled with added obstacles and hurdles. On the contrary, the majority of the testimonialistas mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic did not change the isolating and independent nature of their dissertation work. Furthermore, within the context of the pandemic and lockdowns, they were able to search for literature and access institutional resources online, which did not halt their dissertation work

and progress, although a few testimonialistas had to modify their data collection method from in-person interviews to interviews conducted through Zoom or other video conferencing tools. Overall, this change did not hinder their progress, as they were able to adapt and continue their academic activities. However, feelings of uncertainty, lack of focus, or struggle with motivation were sentiments that testimonialistas had in common as they were adapting and initially navigating a new reality while coping with the requirements of their doctoral program.

Even though five of the seven testimonialistas did not identify as family caregivers, all participants identified as professors, teachers, or educational leaders. These professional identities required them to listen to and experience peoples' needs for community connections and emotional support; therefore, in their professional context, testimonialistas experienced an increase in their amount of emotional labor. This additional labor emerged from their role as educational leaders who listened to colleagues and students express their uncertainties and challenges (Bukko & Dhesi, 2021). As educational leaders adapting to new realities, they perceived it as their responsibility to keep a neutral and calm demeanor while helping students and colleagues overcome stressful moments; whereas, at a personal level, participants were also experiencing health-related issues, preventive guidelines, and other stressors resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Aside from emotional labor, scholar-practitioners experienced changes in their leadership roles. These changes were seen as positive because participants strengthened their leadership roles within their educational community. Testimonialistas lead the adaptation of practices and the implementation of new policies that helped mitigate the effects of the pandemic (Brochu et al., 2021; Bukko & Dhesi, 2021). In this regard, participants coincided with the literature as they spoke about adapting their leadership practices to match new responsibilities. However, the literature did not allude to the idea that educational leaders took advantage of this unique situation to reinforce

their leadership role. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic provided Elena with the context to solidify her status as a content expert by using her skillset and knowledge in implementing new policies and procedures. She provided the environment needed to develop her teams' leadership skills by getting together and developing ideas that later, each one of her team members would take over to their schools and modify according to their specific needs.

Support Systems

Doctoral students benefit from academic, personal, and professional support systems while seeking development, engagement, and success; however, nontraditional students, such as Ed.D. students, struggle with building strong support systems due to time constraints and multiple commitments emanating from their various roles (Terry & Ghosh, 2015). This study revealed that participants relied on a diverse array of support systems, institutional and non-institutional, that aided them in successfully navigating the Ed.D. program, its dissertation components, multiple responsibilities, and the unique challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The literature states that professors and experienced scholars are essential in providing mentorship that is significant in promoting the persistence of doctoral students (Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2013). In particular, mentorship is indispensable for minority students or first-generation students by helping them develop self-confidence, acquire research knowledge, and strengthen their academic identity (Bukko & Dhesi, 2021; Crumb, 2022; Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2013). Although the literature cited above is not specific to women, Chicanas, Mexican-Americans, or Ed.D. students, my research findings reinforced this literature as testimonialistas indicated that the active involvement of their dissertation chairs and professors was essential for the development and completion of their dissertation work regardless of the pandemic status. The majority of the testimonialistas mentioned the positive effect of having a committed and responsive

professor or dissertation chair who provided them with timely feedback, guidance, and suggested additional research material. Furthermore, they mentioned it was extremely beneficial for them to have had Chicana or Mexican-American female mentors because they felt, as a minority group, represented in academic environments, and this representation provided them with the motivation to keep pursuing their doctoral degrees.

Aside from the support provided by professors and dissertation chairs, testimonialistas discussed the importance of the collaborative connections their cohort members provided to their doctoral journey. Bukko & Dhesi (2021) mentioned that the cohort format is seen to enrich the development of research knowledge and offers a supportive environment for discussion and community building. Additionally, for Ed.D. students, the cohort model can become a community that helps alleviate feelings of isolation and assists in the development of students' research identity while fostering intellectual development through co-construction of knowledge and research discussion (Brochu et al., 2021). In alignment with these concepts, participants in this study saw their cohorts as an interdependent community that extended beyond the Ed.D. program coursework by exchanging personal and professional experiences. Furthermore, they stated that their cohort created a community where, regardless of the pandemic, they felt supported by mutually sharing experiences, validating feelings, reaching understandings, and providing advice. After the pandemic was declared, their cohort became crucial for these participants as it provided them with a supportive community that kept them accountable for their doctoral work by constantly checking in on each other while offering the motivation needed to persist and overcome uncertainties and isolating feelings.

In addition to institutional support systems, participants relied on non-institutional support systems, specifically their families, to overcome the uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic and

complete the doctoral program. Latino parents are regarded as supportive of their daughters' doctoral endeavors, as education is highly valued in the nuclear family, although as parents, they are less familiar with higher education or graduate school (Crumb, 2022; Espino et al., 2010; Ramos & Torres-Fernandez, 2020). Furthermore, Chicana daughters are encouraged to earn college degrees as a form of liberation and independence (Espino, 2016). Nonetheless, once Chicana daughters earn their college degrees, the pressure to fulfill gender roles may come back as a priority, like getting married, attending to their relatives, or having children (Espino, 2016). Confirming the literature presented above, testimonialistas alluded to the support they received from their family and the importance they attached to pursuing an education. However, their family was not knowledgeable about the implications and responsibilities associated with obtaining a doctoral degree. In contrast to being pressured to fulfill gender roles and responsibilities, these participants did not feel pressure to fulfill gender roles throughout their doctoral journey, as their parents were supportive of their life choices.

The research literature also noted that within the COVID-19 context, women experienced an increase in household work, homeschooling duties, childcare, and family-related responsibilities (Alon et al., 2020; Carli, 2020; Cohen & van der Meulen Rodgers, 2021; Fisher & Ryan, 2021; Raj Kumar et al., 2022; United Nations, 2020). In this study, testimonialistas who identified as mothers confirmed this literature as they experienced an increase in household and childcare responsibilities. However, it is important to highlight that they managed to share household and childcare responsibilities with their partners. Therefore, sharing responsibilities with their spouses allowed them to fulfill their professional and academic activities while strengthening their family bonds by working all together to accomplish daily tasks.

Sense Of Purpose

Although life is full of uncertainties, it is important not to lose sight of one's purpose and acknowledge the need to reframe one's roles to achieve desired outcomes (Brochu et al., 2021). In alignment with Brochu et al. (2021), testimonialistas experienced a strong sense of commitment to self by increasing awareness of their mental and emotional needs. Furthermore, while managing multiple responsibilities and navigating the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, participants emphasized that the outbreak had reignited their gratitude for life, health, family, and well-being. Additionally, participants allowed themselves to momentarily experience uncertainty, fear, or any other negative emotion that would come at them. However, after acknowledging these feelings, they realized the importance of reminding themselves of their purpose. Participants also used strategies such as self-talk, self-motivation, self-direction, and mental strength to overcome intrusive thoughts or negative feelings.

STUDY PARAMETERS

This study has two main parameters. The first parameter of the study is related to participants' identities. The participants identified as Chicanas or Mexican-American female students who were enrolled in an Ed.D. doctoral program at the time the COVID-19 pandemic was declared. Although the study's focus is narrow, it sought to highlight the different experiences Chicanas or Mexican-American women had during the pandemic. The second significant parameter to consider is related to participants' socioeconomic status. This study represented the experiences of women with a post-secondary education who, according to the literature, are most likely to have income stability, upward economic and social mobility, and increased job opportunities (Brochu et al., 2021; Castellanos et al., 2005; Donohue et al., 2021; Fernandez, 2020; López et al., 2022). Thus, this study is not representative of women with lower socioeconomic

status who, according to COVID-19 literature, were most impacted by the pre-existing gender, economic, and social inequities (Ahluwalia-Cameron, 2022; Alon et al., 2020; Cohen & van der Meulen Rodgers, 2021; Fisher & Ryan, 2021; Raj Kumar et al., 2022).

Future Research

Taking into consideration the parameters of the study and unique findings that do not conform with the existing literature, I have two recommendations for future research. First, while this research suggests that Chicanas or Mexican-American Ed.D. students have identities rooted in familismo and the nature of their identifies requires the intersection of multiple roles and responsibilities, the COVID-19 pandemic did not hinder family relations nor presented an obstacle to fulfilling their professional or academic responsibilities. For example, participants expressed that their families did not pressure them to fulfill gender roles throughout their doctoral journey, as their parents were supportive of their life choices. Additionally, participants experienced positive changes to their leadership roles as they strengthened their leadership style and reinforced their expertise within their educational community. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to explore their family dynamics, cultural identity, support system, experiences, philosophies, or values that were crucial for the successful completion of their doctoral degree while allowing them to succeed in other areas.

Second, this study only focused on participants who successfully completed their dissertation and graduated from the Ed.D. degree program. Thus, future research could delve into the experiences of Chicanas or Mexican-American Ed.D. students who left the program during the COVID-19 pandemic or have not been able to complete the dissertation work. It would be interesting to explore and analyze the circumstances that required them to withdraw from the program and, if possible, do a comparative analysis against the findings of this study to see

whether those who withdrew from the program experienced situations that conform to the current literature.

Recommendations for Practice

According to the literature, the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated the already complex nature of an Ed.D. program as students were forced to quickly adapt to the convergence of their professional, personal, and academic roles into a single virtual space. The pandemic left scholar-practitioners pivoting a multitude of challenges that had never been seen before, and their convergence created complex issues for which there was not a single solution. However, this research alluded to a different reality as seven Chicana or Mexican-American female scholar-practitioners successfully completed their dissertation and graduated from the Ed.D. degree program. These testimonialistas were able to negotiate their multiple identities and roles during the COVID-19 pandemic, relied on different support systems that helped them complete their doctoral program, and found a sense of purpose that guided participants' academic success.

Therefore, I have three recommendations for practice. First, considering the resilience presented by these participants and their intersecting roles, Ed.D. programs should conduct surveys or focus groups to better understand students' academic or personal challenges that may impact their persistence and degree completion (Contreras, et al., 2022). By identifying students at risk, Ed.D. programs may offer support services through existing institutional resources, such as counseling or mentoring sessions (Walsh et al., 2021). Preventive measures may assist at-risk students to better manage their responsibilities without having to withdraw from their doctoral program, particularly amidst future unprecedented events. While this research refers to the significance of having strong support systems during a doctoral program, it is crucial to identify

those resilient Chicana or Mexican-American female Ed.D. students who have a strong sense of purpose but are navigating their doctoral journey at a disadvantage.

My second recommendation pertains to the positive influence the cohort system has on student academic achievement. Considering the demanding nature of a doctoral program and the complexity of scholar-practitioners' identities, Ed.D. programs should continue facilitating the cohort model and strengthening the sense of community among different cohorts and faculty. As a student who felt overwhelmed during the pandemic, I appreciated the initiatives professors took during classes to check in with students. This simple act of asking, at the beginning of Zoom classes, how we were doing or if we needed any support was a determinant in my decision not to withdraw from the program. These gestures gave me the feeling that the faculty was ensuring that students and faculty felt interconnected; I did not feel forgotten. I felt as if I mattered. Although my cohort did not create a strong bond, testimonialistas mentioned how pivotal their cohort members were to their doctoral journey by providing emotional support, motivation, accountability, and sometimes sharing academic resources. Therefore, I recommend that Ed.D. programs continue strengthening initiatives to continue building connections, either student-to-student or faculty-to-student, to reduce feelings of isolation and foster cooperative knowledge development (Brochu et al., 2021; Bukko & Dhesi, 2021).

The findings of this study suggest that family support is key to addressing emotional needs and providing purpose for academic perseverance. Therefore, doctoral programs could benefit from recognizing the critical role that family, partners, and peers play in the lives of doctoral students by organizing family-friendly events, such as a research potluck where students can bring their families and share about their research. Although during the pandemic, in-person interactions were not allowed, it is important to consider more family-friendly initiatives to create a stronger

network surrounding Ed.D. students by creating a metaphorical bridge between the academic world and their nuclear family. For Mexican-American women, such as these testimonialistas, this is important as they struggle to balance their cultural expectations and roles while finding the purpose for academic perseverance.

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Appendix A: Screening Questionnaire

1. What gender do you identify as?

○ Man

○ Woman

○ Trans-gender

○ Non-binary

2. What is your age group?

○ 18-24

○ 25-34

○ 35-44

○ 45-54

○ 55-64

○ 65-over

3. Do you identify as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin? Select all that apply

☐ No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin

☐ Yes, Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano(a)

☐ Yes, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Salvadoran, Dominican, Colombian, Guatemalan, Spaniard, Ecuadorian, or other Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin

4. Which one of the statements below best describes your living arrangements? Select all that apply

☐ Living alone

☐ Living with children

☐ Living with immediate family

☐ Living with extended family

☐ Living with nonfamily members

5. Which of the following categories best describes your employment status?

○ Employed, working 1-39 hours per week

○ Employed, working 40 or more hours per week

○ Not employed, looking for work

○ Not employed, NOT looking for work

○ Retired

○ Disabled, not able to work

6. What language do you mainly speak at home?

_____

7. What year did you start your doctoral program?

_____

8. In which doctoral program did you enroll?

_____

9. What year did you graduate from your doctoral program?

_____

10. On March 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic was declared and lockdown measures were implemented, were you completing any academic requirements?

○ Yes

○ No

11. If yes, please specify which classes you were taking or what academic activities you were working on

_____

12. Were these activities related to your dissertation project?

_____

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Identity

1. Tell me about yourself
    a. Are you a first-generation college student?
    b. Are you a first-generation immigrant student?
    c. What other responsibilities besides school (personal, academic, professional) do you have?
2. How did you decide you wanted to pursue a doctoral degree?

Before COVID-19

1. How did your multiple responsibilities intersect with your life as a doctoral student?
2. What kind of support did you rely on to meet your academic responsibilities?

During COVID-19

1. Do you recall what class you were taking when the COVID-19 pandemic was declared?
2. Do you recall your feelings at the time?
3. How did you rearrange your life?
    a. How did your multiple responsibilities intersect during this time?
    b. What kind of support did you rely on to meet academic responsibilities?
4. Do you feel certain expectations were in place because of your identity?
5. How did you manage your dissertation work?
6. What were the main obstacles and motivators?
7. How did you cope? What were the strategies you used to succeed?

8. Is there anything else you think is important for me to understand your experiences as a Chicana doctoral student in an Educational Leadership Doctoral program (Ed.D.) during the dissertation phase within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Vita

Jazmin Carrera-Blas received a B.B.A. in Marketing in 2008 and an M.B.A. with a concentration in Healthcare Leadership Management in 2012 from The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). Currently, she is a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership and Administration program.

While in the Ed.D. program at UTEP, Ms. Carrera-Blas has worked at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso (TTUHSC El Paso) for 11 years. She has been responsible for the development of the L. Frederick Francis Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and its programs, such as the Master of Science in Biomedical Sciences, Post-Baccalaureate Certificate Program in Biomedical Sciences, Summer Accelerated Biomedical Research (SABR) program, and currently the Doctor of Philosophy in Biomedical Sciences.

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