

A Chicana's Perspective on Navigating and Plugging Leaks in the Educational Pipeline

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Abstract: This narrative provides an overview of my educational journey as a young, Chicana student mother and now assistant professor in a large public research university in the Southwest. It documents the leakage points in my educational pipeline as well as the pivotal moments that contributed to my success, as only .2% of Chicanx earn a PhD. I offer recommendations for supporting underrepresented students in higher education and, particularly, in social work.

Keywords: Chicanx, Chicana, educational pipeline, underrepresented students

I grew up in the North Side of Denver, Colorado, in the 1980s. This meant my family lived in a predominately working-class Latinx neighborhood where families stayed for generations. It also meant schools that served this area were low-performing and had high push-out rates. Only when I was much older did I learn that the place I grew up was not a safe place to live. My parents had always dreamt of moving to a neighborhood with more opportunities for their children.

My parents were both young when they met and married; my father was 21 years old and my mother was just 16 years old. My father was fortunate to access higher education through an Equal Opportunities Program which was intended to recruit Chicana/o students into higher education, and he was the first person in his family to graduate from college. My mother graduated from high school and enrolled in college but had to leave to care for my older brother and sister when they were born. Both of my parents were involved in the Chicano Movement during the 1970s, which created opportunities to build group identity, provided access to education, and reclaimed Mexican American history in schools, which was often excluded in traditional school curricula (Lechuga-Peña & Lechuga, 2018). The Chicano Movement and the educational capital they gained helped my parents become advocates for themselves and their communities, a skill they would pass on to their children.

My educational experience began at a small private Lutheran school, just up the street from our house. We were not very religious, but my parents wanted us to attend a school with small class sizes and academic rigor, something that the local public schools could not offer. I was the youngest of four children and we were fortunate to attend this private school through a tuition assistance program. Most of the other children in the neighborhood attended the local public school. I went to school with nearly 200—predominately white—students. I knew that I was different from the other students, but at the time, I did not realize it was because of the color of my skin. Unfortunately, after my first year there, the school closed due to low enrollment, and my siblings and I were sent to another Lutheran school in the North Side. I attended this second school through the fourth grade and, once again, it was obvious that I was different. After three years at this school, my parents withdrew me as the tuition for four children became a barrier and we were asked to leave. Choosing a school with the same educational expectations for their

children was a priority for my parents. Fortunately, they found a small private Catholic school for us within the North Side. Research shows that Latina/o parents being involved in their children's education, including by making personal sacrifices for quality education, has a significant positive association with academic outcomes (Ceballo et al., 2014). It was at this third school where I finally began to feel like I had found my place. The difference at this school was that there were other students who looked like me and had families like mine—and while the school was still in the North Side, our new home was not. Things were also going well at home. My parents were doing better financially and their dream of moving us out of the North Side had become a reality.

During this time, my parents seemed happier than they had ever been. However, this did not last very long. Just as I started to feel like nothing could go wrong, our lives took a drastic turn. It was toward the end of my fifth-grade year when my school told me that I had to leave. At the time, I did not realize why. I just knew it was one of the hardest things that I had ever had to do, as I was finally in a school where I felt accepted. Having attended three different elementary schools by this time, it never occurred to me that I would have to attend another. I said goodbye to my friends and enrolled in the neighborhood public school by my new house. Later in life, I found out it was because my parents could not afford to continue paying our tuition and the school was not willing to let us finish out the school year there. This fourth elementary school would be my introduction to *public* education in a predominately white school and neighborhood. Although my parents had moved us out of the North Side, the school had connected me there—once I moved to this public school, I completely lost that connection and entered a whole new world.

At this new school, I wanted to belong so badly that I started hanging out with the “wrong” crowd. We were a group of girls and boys of color, some of the only ones in the school. The familiarity of this group and shared identities initially attracted me to these students. I began to make some poor choices and immediately my parents stepped in. They spoke to my teacher, Mr. Gonzales, and he saved my sixth-grade year. I had bought into the idea that I was not smart and began to disengage—and in retrospect, I think all of us students of color bought into this idea and so these “prophecies” had begun to self-fulfill. Mr. Gonzales saw something in me that I could not see at the time, and he pushed me in ways other teachers had not. He encouraged me to read, asked my opinion on topics, and even put me in leadership roles as often as possible. I truly believe he saved me that year and steered me back on the right path. He would be one of my first mentors, which research says can be critical for Latina/o students (Ramirez, 2012; Lechuga-Peña & Lechuga, 2018). Unfortunately, this was my last year at this school before I moved on to middle school. By the time I finished the eighth grade, I had attended five schools during my primary school years.

I began my freshman year at a large middle- to upper-class white public school. This new school was a huge culture shock from the schools I had previously attended. Here, students wore designer clothes and shoes. Their parents drove them to school in new cars and their homes were twice the size of mine. Every day at lunch was a new challenge. It was a good day if I had money to buy something to eat, while my friends spent money on whatever they felt like eating that day. It was clear from my first day there that not only did I look different from them, but they also had a very different lifestyle than mine, where money was never an issue. It was here

where I first experienced overt racism and when I was first tracked into remedial courses, a common occurrence for Latino and African American students (Muller et al., 2010). I was placed in lower-level science and math courses even though my previous grades and standardized tests indicated I was on grade level. My parents did not question the school and I never let them know how easy the classes were for me. It was not a coincidence that most of the other students in these classes were students of color.

My first experience with overt racism occurred this same year. On a weekly basis, my sister and I received hate notes in our lockers with racist messages telling us to go back to where we came from. Our peers made it clear that my sister and I did not belong because we were Mexican. My parents immediately went to the principal and demanded a swift response to this treatment. My father was the president of our local League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) chapter at the time, and he had extensive experience addressing issues of discrimination. He made it clear that his children should not have to experience hate. However, even with my father's knowledge and advocacy, the principal made light of the situation, treating it like it was just kids acting out. I found out later that many of the students of color experienced racism, but the school and staff either simply failed to acknowledge it or dismissed it outright. While this was happening at my school, it was also a stressful time for my parents: My father was laid off from work, and they could no longer afford to pay the rent for the small apartment we lived in. My parents decided to move back to the North Side because they could not afford to pay the housing prices in our neighborhood—but backing this decision was their desire to remove us from the hostile school environment we were experiencing.

Once again, I moved schools. I started my tenth-grade year at North High School, the seventh school I had attended at this point. At the time, my school was one of the lowest-performing high schools in Denver Public Schools and had a very low graduation rate; it has since increased to 64.5% (Colorado Department of Education, 2017). Gangs, violence, drugs, and teen pregnancy were commonplace. I was now in a predominately low-income Mexican and Chicana/o school. Here, students were very outspoken about who their friends were, the pride they had in their culture, and their willingness to die for the “hood” they represented. This was the life my parents had tried so hard to shelter us from. Although I was surrounded by students who identified as I did, it was a different type of “culture shock.” I did not dress or talk like these students; I felt like an outsider within my own community.

When I registered for classes, I was fortunate to be placed in higher-level courses on the accelerated track because my parents advocated for me, and this time the school administrators listened to them. Upon reflection later in life, I realized all my advanced placement classes were with the white students that attended North and only a few other Latina/o students. This was the opposite of my experience in remedial classes at my previous school, but it was still a form of tracking. In these classes, I was challenged daily and asked to think critically. I felt like I belonged in these classes and in these spaces, as I could keep up academically, but everywhere else I was just another brown student trying to find acceptance. I started to distance myself from the other Latina/o students, and I began to experience internalized oppression, which Marsiglia and Kulis (2009) define as a state of self-hate that can be experienced as stress, guilt, stigma, and shame. I wanted to be like the white students in my classes, so I began to reject my culture. This was a result of the negative messages that were ingrained in me while attending predominately

white schools and the continued messages I received from the students that surrounded me. At North, I was one of the top-performing students, but I would find out later that this was not nearly enough to succeed in college, and my peers in secondary education had vastly better prior educational capital.

During my junior year in high school, I became pregnant. Early motherhood would set the tone for how others treated me and shape the negative internalized messages I began to believe about myself. In my mind, I had become another stereotype at North: a young uneducated Latina mother. Becoming a teen mother had many consequences. For example, I was not encouraged to apply to college, and when I approached the college counselor, she refused to give me applications for universities—she instead told me it would be best to apply to community colleges. Additionally, I stopped participating in extracurricular activities, set my school schedule to end by 11:00 a.m. in order to work part-time, and enrolled in low-level classes to reduce my workload outside of class. I began to believe that I was not worthy of continuing my higher education and that my new role was to be a mother. Fortunately, during my last semester of high school, I took a Chicano studies course with Mr. Salazar. This was my first experience where I was pushed to think about what it meant to be a Chicana and how this influenced my identity. He was another teacher that believed in my potential and didn't see me as just a stereotypical teen mother, but a student with aspirations. It was also at this time that I was introduced to a student group, *Movimiento Estudiantil Chican@ de Aztlán (MEChA)*, the largest organization of Raza Youth in the United States that promotes higher education, cultura, and historia (MEChA, 2020). In Mr. Salazar's class and with this student group, I found a place where I felt fully accepted. I began to embrace who I was. I pushed through my senior year, going to school during the day and working in the afternoons and evenings, and eventually graduated. I was finally on my way to Metropolitan State College of Denver. I was so excited because I thought that I had beaten the odds. I was a Latina teen mom, yes, but a teen mom with a high school diploma. Little did I know that the next five years would be the hardest years of my educational experience. I had made it through what Sólorzano et al. (2005) call the "first point in the pipeline" for Chicana/o students.

When I began my first year as an undergrad, I thought that I was academically prepared, but found out quickly that this was not the case. I found myself in remedial math and struggled to get through my English, public speaking, and history classes, which is often the case for Latina/o students (Melguizo et al., 2008). The one class that I did well in was Chicano studies, as I was most engaged in this content. I read everything on the syllabus and found that the stories and experiences of other Chicanas/os were just like mine. Just like I had in the sixth grade and my last semester of high school, I began to regain my confidence and believe that I could be successful. However, during my first year, I failed two of my classes, barely managed to stay enrolled, and was placed on academic probation, affecting my financial aid. By this time, most of my friends that had managed to graduate from high school and continue onto college had dropped out, another "leakage point in the educational pipeline" for Chicana/o students (Sólorzano et al., 2005, p. 277). I was still chugging away, though barely getting through. Two years later, during my third year in school, I took a course titled Introduction to Human Services and was exposed to the helping profession of social work. I was immediately drawn to the content and realized I wanted to help other youth that struggled in school, particularly young mothers. In my courses, I learned that it was not only individual-level factors that influence

academic outcomes, but also systemic forces that contribute to school failure. As cliché as it sounds, I had found my calling. I believed that I could make a difference in a youth's life and show them what was possible.

Before I knew it, five and a half years had gone by and I was finally graduating. I could not believe that, after all the struggles that I had gone through, I had made it. Completing a college degree meant that I had beaten the odds. I was not another Chicana who had fallen through the cracks—or, as one of my mentors says, “been pushed” through the cracks. I was now the one out of eight Chicana/o students that graduates from college (Sólorzano et al., 2005). During my last semester of college, one of my human services professors approached me and encouraged me to apply to an MSW program. My understanding of graduate school was that it was not for students like me, but for others who were intelligent, had the financial means, and were white. I did not see myself continuing on to such a rigorous academic career—I was done. However, after some considerable thought, soul-searching, and gentle nudges from mentors, I applied to two MSW programs, one in my hometown and one on the East Coast. I was fortunate that my professor and mentors believed in my abilities and saw something in me that I could not see in myself. My professor also connected me to financial support in the programs, which was critical to continue my education. According to Ramirez (2012), two of the main reasons Latina/o students choose their graduate programs are faculty influences and financial considerations. These two factors were instrumental in my decision to pursue a graduate degree.

After applying to and being accepted into both programs, I decided to attend the School for Social Work at Smith College since they provided a full-tuition scholarship. I was very fortunate that my parents were so supportive and encouraged me to make the decision that was best for my education. Having never traveled east of Kansas, I made the difficult decision to leave my son behind with my parents and head to what might as well have been another country: Northampton, Massachusetts. Leaving my child was one of the hardest decisions I have ever made in my life. I grappled with taking him with me, but I had to consider where we were going to live and how I would provide childcare for him, manage my coursework, and still be a “good” mother. I felt very conflicted about my decision. In the short-term, he would be growing up without his mother, but in the long-term, I would be in a better position financially to provide for him. With a heavy heart, I packed my bags and traveled across the country to pursue my MSW.

At Smith College, I was confronted with the level of inequitable education I had received and the privilege that other students lived with. Many of the students were very wealthy and well-traveled and had received an excellent education prior to their graduate program. During my first year, I was exposed to a completely new culture and way of life. My peers talked about their international travel and wrote and spoke using words that I had to look up in a dictionary. I was often told how surprised they were that Mexicans live in Colorado. They had an idea of what a Coloradan was—“a white ski bum.” Little did they know what my lived experience really entailed. I was one of a few students of color, and, naturally, we gravitated toward each other. This was essential to my success in the program. However, although I had several shared identities with these students, none were parents. I often felt alone and guilty for having made the decision to leave my son behind. This weighed heavily on me and affected the time and effort I put into my coursework. The culture shock, high academic expectation, and distance from my son and family took its toll. I decided to go home and transfer to the Graduate School

of Social Work at the University of Denver to complete my MSW. Financially it was not a wise move, but emotionally it was the best decision for me at the time. It took me two years, but I earned a master's degree. This was the highlight of my life. I had an advanced degree and had surpassed my parents' education level. This was something that I had never thought was possible. Considering the education pipeline for Chicana/o students, I was now one of two students that completes a graduate degree (Sólorzano et al., 2005). I had made it; I was a success! I could now walk around with my head up high and speak with confidence. I was "liberated," a state Freire (1970) argues is achieved when oppressed individuals lead their own struggle for freedom. Education, he states, is the key to human transformation.

Seven years later, in 2012, I attended a sociology conference and was in a room full of Latina/o scholars who all held a PhD, including my older sister. I was so inspired by what I saw, and as I listened to them talk, I began to reflect on my own educational journey and wondered if it was over. It was at this time that I developed a new mentor/mentee relationship with a Chicana faculty member, Dr. Debora Ortega at the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver. Every time I met with her, I gained more confidence, and she helped me see my potential contributions to the social work field. Seeing Latinas with a PhD, my sister showing me a PhD was possible, and finding a mentor that supported me all influenced my decision to apply to doctoral programs. I knew that if I earned a PhD, I could make an impact on education for low-income, marginalized youth. I struggled through the GRE exam, spent weeks writing my personal statement, and hesitantly submitted my PhD applications on the morning of the due dates. I realized I had put off applying to programs to the last minute because I did not believe I was smart enough to be or deserved to be in a program with some of the brightest minds in social work. All of my negative schooling experiences, including attending multiple schools, being one of a few students of color, and the stigma of being a young Latina mother, tested my confidence. I was afraid of rejection, a reoccurring theme throughout my education.

Eight weeks later, I was notified that I was accepted to both of the PhD programs I applied to. I read the letters out loud and asked my mentor to confirm that this was not a mistake—"Did they mean to accept someone else?" I asked. Of course, despite my disbelief, I was the one they wanted. I began my PhD program with the doubt that had always been there, but with a fighting spirit that never failed. Four years later, I completed the last of my coursework, passed comprehensive exams, and defended my dissertation proposal and final dissertation. I became Dr. Stephanie Lechuga-Peña. According to Sólorzano et al. (2005), only .2% of Chicanas/os will complete a doctoral degree; I was now one of them.

I am now in my fourth year as an assistant professor in social work, at a large public research university in the Southwest. My son graduated from college this past year and is the third generation in my family to pursue higher education. I have made several sacrifices as a young mother in academia; time away from my children being the biggest sacrifice of them all. However, I know that I set an example for my children and showed them that they belong in academia. The educational capital I passed down to them, along with family support and mentoring is essential in their educational success (Lechuga-Peña & Lechuga, 2018). I often reflect on my educational journey remembering young motherhood, academically and financially struggling as a college and graduate student, and the self-doubting first-generation graduate and doctoral student I was. As a new junior faculty member, I have realized that the

negative internal voices never leave me, and imposter syndrome still rears its ugly head. However, I have learned to quiet these voices when they are too loud, but also embrace my imposter syndrome as part of who I am and who I will become.

While I am grateful to be a faculty member in a school of social work, there are several challenges I still face. I am one of a few faculty members of color in my social work program and therefore I have additional expectations placed on me, including those from students of color seeking mentoring, those from service requests both from my school and from the community, and those from the constant need to validate my expertise in teaching and research. Although these challenges are present and exhausting at times, I know that I am fortunate to be in such a privileged position. I am tasked with training the next generation of social workers and ensuring they are competent, culturally responsive, and committed to our field. I have the honor of working with communities and families to support their children's educational experiences, and my research has the potential to influence policy and practice.

Latinas experience multiple barriers when pursuing higher education, including low socioeconomic status, the effects of cultural and gender-related stereotyping, social and familial obligations, and institutional marginalization (Rodriguez et al., 2000). Furthermore, González et al. (2003) note Latina students who do not have access to social and cultural capital from elementary school continuing into high school fail to receive college planning and preparation. In other words, academic ability and potential are never real barriers for Latinas, but enduring low and high volumes of institutional neglect and abuse throughout their K-12 public schooling limits their opportunities to access higher education. Considering all of these barriers, I understand the factors that were essential in my educational journey and that contributed to my role now as an assistant professor in social work. I offer the following recommendations to support underrepresented students. First, having someone believe in your potential and invest their time in your success is critical. As a junior faculty member, I understand the time constraints that exist and the sacrifices we make to mentor students, particularly those that are underrepresented. For example, when a student asks for a letter of recommendation or to meet with them because they are struggling in their program, although I may be overwhelmed with my own work, I make the time for them. This meeting may be the reason they stay or leave the program. Second, being exposed to social work and the helping professions early in a student's education may help them if they are struggling to stay in school. As faculty, it is important to connect social work content to a student's lived experience, as they bring a unique and critical perspective that should be acknowledged and honored. This content and these classes may be the only things that are keeping them engaged in school. Third, financial support is critical, especially for low-income students, to continue on to graduate school and ultimately doctoral programs. Often, students are working part-time or full-time jobs and have children or parents they are financially supporting in addition to required internships for their programs. Finally, representation is essential. When students see faculty and doctoral students that look like them, it shows them the possibilities and that a PhD is attainable.

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