



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION | UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA

**JOURNAL OF CURRICULUM, TEACHING,
LEARNING, AND LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION**

Volume 3
Issue 1 *Special Issue: Socio-Political Issues in
Education*

Article 2

December 2018

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Recommended Citation

Atwood, Erin D. (2018) "Understanding School and Community Contexts: Leading for success along the Texas-Mexico border," *Journal of Curriculum, Teaching, Learning and Leadership in Education*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/ctlle/vol3/iss1/2>

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UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY CONTEXTS: LEADING FOR SUCCESS ALONG THE TEXAS-MEXICO BORDER

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Abstract: Enacting social justice leadership requires that school leaders understand social, political, and historic contexts of the communities and schools where they lead. This paper examines the McAllen-Edinburg-Mission metropolitan area and highlights some of these issues within this particular community along the Texas-Mexico border. This description of the area provides understanding of the uniqueness of borderlands contexts and allows us to better understand the social justice work of one local school district in leading for success in this context.

Equity and social justice are common terms used in various fields within education, yet these terms have also become muddled and misconstrued “buzzwords” that are in danger of losing their meaning and power all together. The term *equality* conveys a sense of sameness, and can be defined as evenly distributed access to resources and opportunity. *Equity* acknowledges that there are historically underserved and marginalized populations and that equal treatment or access alone does not address these power imbalances. Equity is also a systemic concept that requires attention to how systems and individuals habitually operate (Scott, 2001). Social justice overlaps with concepts of equity, yet rather than just understanding equity issues that exist, social justice requires action to change and seek solutions to these inequities. *Social justice* can be understood as both a goal, the goal of creating a society that is just for all individuals and groups, and an action, the act of engaging in an ongoing struggle, seeking change, advocating, and reflecting (Theoharis, 2009; Bogotch, 2002). *Social justice leaders* are those who keep “at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically marginalizing factors in the United States” (Theoharis, 2009, p. 11). To enact social justice leadership requires that a school leader understands social, political, and historic contexts of the communities and schools where they lead. This paper highlights some of these issues within a community along the Texas Mexico border.

Understanding Border Contexts as Unique from Other Metropolitan Areas

Typical racial understandings of urban centers in the United States begin with looking across history from slavery, “white flight” from cities to the suburbs post WWII, to discriminatory policies such as Jim Crow laws and redlining housing practices. While Civil Rights movements brought greater attention to the racial disparities, racial integration in the United States peaked around 1970 (Wells, Holme, Revilla, & Atanda, 2009). Rather than making continued progress, today we witness an increase in racial concentration and isolation taking place in our cities and suburbs. These historic problems typify the idea of metropolitan areas in the United States. However, there is little in common between this standard “urban” idea and the McAllen-Edinburg-Mission metro area in the border region of Texas.

Geographically, all of Hidalgo County comprises this metropolitan statistical area (MSA). The McAllen MSA has a total population of 849,843 residents, making it the fifth largest metro area in Texas, and third largest along the US-Mexico border. It is home to a population that is 92% Latino (ACS, 2016), and is located in a region that is 84% Latino (Shapleigh, 2005). Rather than racial isolation and concentration of poverty within cities according to census tract, the 43 Texas counties that comprise the border region contain a highly Latino population and contend with issues of regional isolation and poverty. If the border region was a state, it would

rank highest in poverty, childhood poverty, number of uninsured residents, and birth rate (Akins & Handal, 2008). Instead of a city scape of concentric decay (Massey & Denton, 1993), McAllen is growing, with development occurring within the largest urban area and sprawling along the two major highways. While problematic issues of race, housing, economics, and human services are all present here, they manifest differently in this locale than in most other cities. In essence, McAllen is atypical of the common conception of metro areas in the United States.

Typical Metro Areas	McAllen-Edinburg-Mission Metro Area
<p>Housing and Structure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Urban core, ringed with suburbs ● More rigid structure (particularly in northern cities) ● Housing discrimination regarding loans and redlining practices ● High concentration of poverty in urban core ● Residents who are white or affluent shift to suburbs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lack of true suburbs or urban core ● Structure is more elastic ● Development of <i>colonias</i> as an alternative to affordable housing or traditional financing methods ● Higher poverty levels in rural areas than in city ● Few residents who are white or affluent
<p>Race</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● High concentration of people of color in central city—Hypersegregation ● Discrimination—history of legal battles, segregated schools, and race based activist groups ● High poverty rates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Predominantly Latino population—evidence of regional segregation and concentration along the Texas border ● Discrimination—history of legal battles, segregated schools, and race based (Latino) activist groups—height of activism occurring after African American civil rights cases ● Highest poverty rate of any metro area in the nation
<p>Population and Economics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Population decline ● Loss of central city jobs, business and more affluent workers move to suburbs—high unemployment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rapidly increasing population ● New jobs being created—aided by the <i>maquiladora</i> factory system on both sides of the border—generating mostly low wage, low skill jobs
<p>Human Services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Low tax base ● Crumbling infrastructure ● Low levels of educational attainment ● Limited access to health care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Low tax base ● Lack of infrastructure—new infrastructure developing in urban areas, but lack of utilities or roads in <i>colonias</i> and rural areas ● Low levels of educational attainment ● Limited access to health care

(Orfield, 1988; Massey & Denton, 1993; Orfield, 1997, and Drier, Mollenkopf, & Swanstrom, 2004)

Social Policies: Segregation, Economics, and History

McAllen, Texas was founded in 1907 primarily to serve as a depot for the railroad. Before that time, the McAllen area was ranch land, with the first ranching operations dating back to 1767 and a land grant from Spain. Ranching has remained an economic interest along with an increasing economic role for farming and the petroleum industry in more recent history.

Economic trends connect to trends in segregation and discrimination in Hidalgo County. Poor treatment of Latino residents can be seen “as a consequence of the shift from a Hispanic- dominated ranching economy to an Anglo- dominated farming economy” during the early to mid- 1900’s (TSHA, 2007). Schools and hospitals were fully segregated, and the McAllen Real Estate Board ensured that residential areas remained segregated, as well. At that time, grammar school was the only education available to Mexican-American students. A 1943 Hidalgo County report on migrant students “reported the widespread ‘attitude that school attendance should not be allowed to interfere with the supply of cheap farm labor’” (Ferg-Cadima, 2004, p. 11).

In contrast to the relative economic success and suburban housing boom experienced by many whites in the post-World War II era, most border residents continued to struggle. Latinos were denied the same rights granted to white residents, unemployment was extremely high, and wages were low for those who were employed (Alemán, 2004). Facing discrimination and segregation similar to the mistreatment of Blacks during this time, the grassroots Chicano movement began to develop. Post-World War II, many veterans returned from combat and hoped to reap the promised benefits of the GI Bill. The “guaranteed” educational, housing, and medical benefits were denied to many Mexican-American veterans, including Hector P. Garcia. Garcia was an army Major and medical doctor who grew up in Mercedes, Texas, in eastern Hidalgo County. He founded the American GI Forum to help defend Mexican-American veterans from discrimination, and the group remains dedicated to its motto, “Education is Our Freedom and Freedom should be Everybody’s Business” (AGIF, 2007).

Latino activists often found it difficult to gain equal protection under the law. Legally, such as on the United States census, Latino citizens were racially labeled as white (with the exception of the 1930 census). Yet segregation within public facilities such as restaurants, movie theatres, hotels, and bowling alleys was not uncommon in Texas and across the Southwest. Latinos were not identified as a “protected class” under the 14th Amendment until the 1954 *Hernandez* case, and despite this recognition and the landmark *Brown* case ending segregation, discriminatory practices based on limited English proficiencies and migrant status persisted. Separate education based on educational need, such as being a Spanish speaker, was still permissible. This allowed districts to maintain separate classes within schools or remedial education tracts, and Latino students were typically placed in these settings because of a “Spanish sounding surname” rather than any measure of their linguistic abilities (Ferg-Cadima, 2004; Alemán, 2004). These policies created a legalized form of segregation that greatly inhibited the flow of students into secondary education. In addition, Latino students often attended school in substandard facilities, had limited access to materials and teachers, and attended a substantially shorter school year than their white peers. Even in non-segregated schools, Latino students faced higher levels of expulsion and degrading treatment, such as public examinations for lice and being required to shower at school facilities before entering their classrooms (Ferg-Cadima, 2004). These practices in various forms persisted until the final major Latino desegregation case in 1971 recognized Latinos as an “identifiable minority group” (instead of just a separate class) and essentially extended the *Brown* decision to Latino students.

Contemporary Segregation and Demographic Changes

As mentioned previously, the McAllen metro area does not follow typical patterns of inner city and suburban development. McAllen and the other communities in Hidalgo County are experiencing dramatic growth. The population of Hidalgo County has increased dramatically with the arrival of roughly 650,000 new residents since 1970 (ACS, 2016; Texas Labor Market, 2007). The area has experienced a 3.2% average growth rate for the past 25 years (Capucion, 2016). In more traditional metro areas, there tends to be areas of poverty and areas of wealth within in same metropolis. In such typical areas, there is evidence of racial segregation between census tracts, and this evidence correlates to factors such the tax base, home ownership, and eligibility for free or reduced price school lunch. Population growth trends combined with persistent poverty, low educational attainment, and a largely Latino population across the entire region makes the classifications of urban, suburban, or “at-risk” areas more complicated for Hidalgo County. Rather than providing evidence of segregation within the McAllen metro area, the data supports a notion of regional segregation and a region that faces substantial challenges to

educational and economic success for students.

Demographic Comparisons: McAllen MSA, Texas, and United States

Category	McAllen-Edinburg-Mission MSA	Texas	National
Percent Latino	92%	39.4%	17.8%
Median Age	29.2	34.5	37.9
Per Capita Income	\$15,918	\$27,828	\$29,829
Median Household Income	\$36,176	\$56,565	\$57,617
Median Housing Value	\$85,200	\$161,500	\$205,000
Poverty Rate	31.4%	15.7%	14.1%
Childhood Poverty Rate	44%	22%	19%
High School Degree/GED or Higher	65.5%	82.9%	87.5%
Bachelors Degree or Higher	18.3%	28.9%	31.3%
Language other than English	84.4%	35.6%	21.6%
Speak English less than “very well”	32.1%	14%	8.6%
Foreign Born	26.7%	17%	11.6%
Without Insurance Coverage	28.3%	16.6%	8.6%
<i>Source: American Community Survey (ACS) 2016</i>			

These figures are startling. While the relatively low cost of living in the area slightly softens the harshness of high poverty and low median income, it is also important to understand that 69.3% of residents live below 200% of the poverty level. Additionally, it is worth noting the ranges of poverty, language, and educational attainment across different census tracts. The tracts with the lowest percentage for poverty and childhood poverty in 2010 were still at 7%. In some census tracts in the McAllen area, 64.2% of children are growing up in poverty. This area is not an example of the contrast between the rich and poor but illustrates a locale where poverty permeates all sections of the metro area. Even more notable is the awareness that these numbers have improved since 1990 (ACS, 2016; US Census Bureau, 2010).

Leadership for Social Justice

Pharr-San Juan-Alamo (PSJA) is a school district located within the south central part of Hidalgo County. These three communities formed an independent school district in 1919 (TSHA, 2007) and currently serve over 32,400 students (PSJA, 2018). Early in school history, white students did not attend schools with Latino or Black students. The “Mexican” grammar school was located in Pharr, and Latino students were not given the opportunity to attend high school until 1925. Even then, Latino students had to petition for high school access. Communities were residentially segregated with whites living in the southern parts of town and people of color living north. Schools remained segregated based on the neighborhoods they served up until the 1970’s, despite the population growth in the area. In 1971, the Chicano movement and members of La Raza Unida and local residents protested the segregation of schools, facilitating campus integration in the district (TSHA, 2007).

Currently, PSJA has a total of nine high schools. All high schools are designated as early college high schools where student can earn college credit and an Associate’s Degree while completing high school requirements. The Early College Initiative was created specifically to address the community issues of low graduation rates and low attendance in post-secondary institutions. This program is possible through a partnership with South Texas College, and make college viable for many students by providing up to two years of college credit for free. The district also utilizes college transition specialist to help students be successful with post-secondary goals. Specialists help students, many of whom are first-generation, with applying for financial aid, navigating the college application, and by supporting students once they are in college to help ensure that they persist and complete their college degrees. Specialized high school campuses also include T-STEM, Career and Technology, and a high school specifically to support teen mothers. Again, these schools target the needs of the community and the student population while working to reduce the barriers to success for students. Additionally, the district has specialized programs to develop students who are bilingual and biliterate, quality extracurricular programs (including chess, robotics, and state recognized mariachi bands), a nationally recognized dropout recovery program, and universal pre-kindergarten for all three- and four-year-olds in the district. The district also has eight parent resource centers. Through their comprehensive Parental Engagement Program, the district is working to both increase the number of parents engaged with schools, but also provide supports for parents such as classes geared towards learning English, earning your GED, Career and Technology courses, and citizenship processes. These programs are possible through partnerships with over 30 community organizations and the support of state and local institutions. Further, the district operates under Community Eligibility Provisions, where all students are eligible to receive free breakfast, lunch, and after-school snack regardless of student economic status. The campuses that host educational enrichment programs also offer supper and provide meals during summer months when school is not in session (PSJA, 2018).

The current superintendent in PSJA is Dr. Daniel King. He joined the district in 2007, and was named the Superintendent of the Year in 2013 by the Texas Association of School Boards. Under his leadership, the leadership of the school board, and a host of committed principals, teachers, and support staff, the district has made substantial changes and progress in the way it educates students. Clearly the programs offered are designed to meet the unique needs of area students. There is deliberate attention to making committed and long-term progress towards educational goals, such as college attainment. Actions to create and support these programs also indicate that school leaders and personnel have a deep understanding of their community and of the needs of students and families. The work being done in PSJA is one example of how a district can embody social justice leadership through developing awareness of school and community contexts, yet awareness is not enough. School leaders have developed specific strategic plans in order to take action and make changes that best support students, families, and the community as a whole. Commitment to social justice also takes time, and this district has made strong gains in student success in the past 11 years. Additionally, the work in this district exemplifies

that social justice and change does not occur in isolation. This work and the sustainability of these projects requires widespread collaboration and the development of partnerships that go beyond individual campuses or the district itself.

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