

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

JUAN I. MARTINEZ

Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership and Administration

APPROVED:

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Angus Shiva Mungal, Ph.D., Chair

---

Rodolfo Rincones, Ph.D.

---

Elena Izquierdo, Ph.D.

---

David DeMatthews, Ph.D.

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Don Schulte, Ed.D

---

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

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## **Dedication**

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

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

PREVIEW

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TIME SUPERINTENDENT

by

JUAN I. MARTINEZ, BA, M.Ed.

DISSERTATION

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

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

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

## **Abstract of the Dissertation**

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

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



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PREVIEW

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

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

(Wall, 2008, p. 39)

### **The Illegitimate Son**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Purpose of the Study**

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

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

### **Background to the Problem**

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

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

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

### **Significance of the Study**

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Practical and Intellectual Goals**

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

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