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A Hispanic Framework for Transformational Leadership in K-12 Education: Puerto Rican Leaders Model Crisis Leadership

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ABSTRACT
The United States, in alignment with the United Nations, has unequivocally declared that education is a human right. However, serious and pervasive achievement gaps grounded in race and socio-economic attainment exist for marginalized students, framing this gap as a human rights issue. Unfortunately, the achievement gaps are growing for Hispanic and Black students as well as English language learners. While closing the representation gap between students, teachers, and principals will address the issue of the achievement gap, this shift will predictably take decades to achieve. The researcher argues that this points to the need for a change in principal leadership as a short-term solution to closing the achievement gap. Hispanic English language learners are the fastest growing demographic of students; therefore, this shift in leadership should encompass the unique needs of Hispanic students. In the aftermath of two devastating hurricanes and the COVID-19 pandemic, the leadership lessons from principals in Puerto Rico offer valuable lessons for educators on the mainland. This article provides a new model for transformational crisis leadership that can close the achievement gap through an equity lens.

KEYWORDS
K-12 Education; racial achievement gap; principal leadership; crisis leadership; transformational leadership; Hispanic Leadership.

INTRODUCTION

More than seven decades ago, the United Nations (1948) clearly and unequivocally declared that education is a human right. The commitment to educational equity has been supported in the United States through myriad legislation since Brown v. Board of Education Topeka (1954), including but not limited to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), Title IX of the Education Amendments (1972), the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (1974), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1990), No Child Left Behind (2002), Race to the Top (2009), and the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015).

Ladson-Billings (2006) embraced education as both a human right and a social justice issue when she argued that Americans must frame the achievement gap as an issue of educational debt owed disenfranchised citizens, including the people of Puerto Rico who are full and equal citizens in the eyes of the law (U.S. Congress, 1952). While education is free and compulsory in the United States, there are serious and pervasive achievement gaps grounded in race and socio-economic attainment for *Puertorriqueños* and many other marginalized students. This raises questions of how social justice can be achieved, how educators can close the achievement gap, and how society can begin to pay down this educational debt when schools and districts are rooted in models of educational leadership that lack cultural competence.

These aren't merely theoretical concepts but critical questions that have the power to positively influence the state of education in profound ways. Here the researcher notes that the United States is becoming a "minority White" country—a country where people of color outnumber White people (Frey, 2018)—with public K-12 schools already being minority White (NCES, 2024b), primarily due to an increasing population of Hispanic English language learners (ELLs). This shift demands a parallel shift in educational leadership (Oubré & Spar, 2022).

The Representation Gap in K-12 Education

The Brookings Institution (Frey, 2018) reported that the United States will become "minority White" by 2045, a projection confirmed by De Visé (2023). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2024b) reported that in the 2021-2022 school year non-White students (55.4%) outnumbered their White peers (44.6%) by 10.8%.

The shift in demographics is largely fueled by a dramatic increase in Hispanic students, whose numbers rose from 24% to 29% in the decade between Fall 2012 and Fall 2022 (NCES, 2024b). Moreover, the percentage of ELLs has increased, constituting 10.6% of students in Fall 2021 and ranging from less than 1% in West Virginia to 20.2% in Texas (NCES, 2024a). The majority of these students (76.4%) are Spanish speaking and come from Hispanic cultures, with no other ethnic group accounting for more than 2.5% (NCES, 2024a). Despite the clarity around educational equity as a human rights and social justice issue, there are significant racial and ethnic achievement gaps in K-12 education in the United States, with ELLs showing the most alarming gaps, as evidenced by the NAEP assessment, commonly known as The Nation's Report Card (see Table 1).

While the Nation's Report Card (2024a) attributes 70% of the achievement gap to student socioeconomic status, there is convincing evidence that racial congruity may play a role. A seminal study by Piggot and Cowen (2000) demonstrated that Black students were judged by teachers more

harshly than their White peers as measured by negative stereotyping, student competencies, serious school adjustment problems, and predictions of future educational outcomes; however, compared to their White peers, Black teachers rated all students as having more competencies, fewer deficits, and more positive academic potential. Another seminal study by Byrd and Chavous (2011) supported this earlier research, showing the importance of racial congruity and school climate to a student's sense of belonging and intrinsic motivation. More recently, Lulic et al. (2023) reported that culturally congruent mentors supported social and emotional learning for Black boys aged 10 to 17.

Table 1.

Achievement Gaps on the NAEP Assessment (2022)

	Grade 4		Grade 8		Grade 12	
	Reading	Math	Reading	Math	Reading	Math
Non-White Compared to White[1]						
Black	-12.32	-15.06	-13.8	-17.93	-19.2	-17.39
Hispanic	-6.4	-8.0	-1.76	-3.51	-3.51	-5.46
ELLS Compared to Non-ELLs[2]	-33.0	-23.0	-41.0	-49.0	-49.0	-41.0

Note. 1 (NAEP, 2024d). 2 (NAEP, 2024b, 2024c).

In stark contrast to K-12 student demographics, 77% of principals leading America's public schools in the 2020-2021 school year were White (NCES, 2023). A 2023 survey of superintendents revealed that 87% of district superintendents were White, down a mere 3% in a decade, with just 4% of superintendents identifying as Hispanic (Peetz, 2023). To be clear, while non-White students constitute 55.4% of the student population in America's public schools, just 13% of superintendents and 23% of principals are leaders of color. While 29% of students identify as Hispanic, just 4% of superintendents and 9% of principals identify as Hispanic.

To summarize, the United States, in alignment with the United Nations (1948), clearly and unequivocally declared that education is a human right. However, serious and pervasive achievement gaps grounded in race and socio-economic attainment exist for marginalized students, framing this gap as a human rights issue (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Public K-12 students are already "minority White," with this shift in demographics largely attributable to a dramatic increase in Hispanic students (NCES, 2024b), many of whom are ELLs from Spanish-speaking Hispanic cultures (NCES, 2024a).

While closing the representation gap will address the issue of the achievement gap (Talbert-Johnson, 2004; Valencia, 2015), this is a shift that will predictably take decades to achieve, if it is in fact achievable. Perrone (2022) asserted that most K-12 principals begin their careers as teachers; validating that representation matters, he makes a compelling argument that the critical lack of diversity in the K-12 leadership pipeline will have "negative implications for individuals in the principal pipeline and educational quality overall." This crisis-in-waiting is exacerbated by the significant reduction in college students pursuing teaching as a career, the dramatic increase in teachers leaving the teaching profession attributable to the pandemic, and alarming predictions

about principals leaving the principalship (Walker, 2022). The researcher argues that this suggests a change in principal leadership as a short-term solution to closing the achievement gap. This points to the first research question, “What practices of Puerto Rican education leaders might be implemented on the mainland to close the achievement gap for Hispanic students?”

Education Leadership in the 21st Century

Principals in Puerto Rico believe in transformational leadership, but we have been forced to practice transactional leadership. For experts in leadership development rooted in dominant White American ideologies, this might be viewed as a setback which has the potential to hinder recovery. However, we argue that transformational leadership as it is currently understood can be maladaptive as a form of leadership, especially for marginalized and oppressed peoples, or leaders in times of crisis. Transformational leadership doesn’t offer Puerto Rican leaders an adequate voice to challenge the systems that oppress us, especially as we lead through crisis. This requires a rethinking of what it means to be a transformational leader.

Transformational Leadership

Bass and Avolio (1995) defined transformational leadership through four factors. First, idealized influence requires leaders who act as role models; they earn respect and trust leading by example and exhibiting high ethical standards. Second, inspirational motivation demands that leaders inspire and motivate followers by promoting a compelling vision, remaining optimistic, and encouraging followers’ enthusiasm and commitment. Third, intellectual stimulation necessitates that leaders challenge assumptions, foster creative thinking and innovation, and promote shared problem-solving. Fourth, individualized consideration asks leaders to provide individualized support, mentorship, and coaching to address followers' unique needs and help them develop to their full potential. Vyas (2020) demonstrated the importance of transformational leadership in K-12 education.

As America moves deeper into the 21st century, transformational leadership has been advanced as the idealized form of leadership (Manu, 2022). This concept highlights the importance of leaders who can navigate and drive change in disruptive environments (i.e., crisis leadership). This involves fostering innovation, challenging existing paradigms, and encouraging a culture that embraces disruption as a catalyst for growth. By doing so, leaders can guide their organizations through uncertainty (i.e., crisis) and position them for long-term success. Manu (2022) speaks to the need to rethink what it means to be a transformational leader.

Transformational leadership has been the preferred leadership style across sectors for decades. While transformational leadership in education has been widely researched, it hasn’t been widely popularized in practice-oriented publications (Kreiness, 2020; Velarde et al., 2022). Bass and Avolio (1995) offered five factors of transformational leadership in education: building trust, acting with integrity, encouraging others, promoting innovative thinking, and coaching and developing people. They identified three general outcomes of good leadership: improving effort and motivation, increasing productivity and performance, and creating greater satisfaction, which drives retention. Avolio and Bass (2002) later proposed a full range leadership model, a continuum between transactional and transformational leadership. Antonakis et al. (2003) reported several

outcomes unique to full range leadership including improved leadership performance with training; greater alignment between strategic vision and mission; greater cohesion, commitment, and employee retention; a predictive role for individual and group performance; safer work environments; and a positive correlation with innovation. This suggests the second research question, "What does it mean to be a Hispanic transformational leader in education?"

The Wallace Foundation Framework

The Wallace Foundation (2013) provided a framework for principal leadership focused on four key leadership attributes for K-12 educational leaders, grounded in transformational leadership: engage in instructionally focused interactions with teachers, build a productive school climate, facilitate collaboration and professional learning communities, and manage personnel and resources strategically. This framework aligns more closely with leadership in Puerto Rico, discussed below; but it, too, has proved inadequate. One of the tenets of this framework speaks to building a productive school climate, which is both culturally dependent and difficult to do when you are leading through crisis (Bernhardsdóttir, 2015).

This article examines the emergence of a new leadership framework in Puerto Rico, which provides a pathway forward for crisis leadership in K-12 education that may benefit all educational leaders: a Hispanic framework for transformational leadership in K-12 education. This new framework aligns with core tenets of the Wallace Foundation (2013) framework and the attributes of transformational leadership, overlaid onto three core values of Hispanic culture: *comunidad*, *solidaridad*, and *esperanza* (community, solidarity, and hope). To fully understand the findings of this study and this new framework, it is important to first examine the deep marginalization and crisis in education in Puerto Rico. This is the environment in which leaders lead, teachers teach, and students learn.

Marginalization and Crisis in Education in Puerto Rico

After Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, donations surpassed $1 billion. Following Hurricane María, Puerto Rico received $9 million. President Trump threw paper towels at us; told our leaders we should feel "very proud" because hundreds of people weren't killed, like in a "real catastrophe;" and complained that our crisis was throwing his budget "out of whack." (Johnson & Parker, 2017)

To understand the context from which educational leaders in Puerto Rico operate, and from which this framework has grown, it is important to understand the marginalization of Puerto Rico. This speaks to the significant challenges faced by education leaders in Puerto Rico, and the magnitude of their skill as leaders. The staggering disparity in support for Puerto Rico following Hurricane María in 2017 exacerbated pervasive systemic education inequality. The achievement gap widened as K-12 students worldwide move beyond the initial intensity of the global COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, Puerto Rico survived another devastation, Hurricane Fiona. Today, sixth graders in Puerto Rico don't have third grade skills; some ninth graders cannot read. Teachers in Puerto Rico are struggling to instruct students who are wrestling with daily insecurity around basic needs, unhealed trauma, and devastating social-emotional deficits. These challenges have the real potential to prevent students' entry into higher education, relegating them to lifelong income

inequality and perpetuating generational cycles of poverty. Yet, Puerto Rico's resilience speaks to its potential as a laboratory for educational change.

The disparities for the citizen children of Puerto Rico and the educational debt that is owed them are shocking compared to Houston, which suffered similar devastation from Hurricane Harvey in 2017, and the United States as a whole (see Table 2). It is difficult to grasp the extent of the problem because Puerto Rico is overlooked in nearly all national databases, publicly available school information sites, and academic research.

Students in Puerto Rico are entirely Hispanic. Puerto Rico has the highest rate of economically disadvantaged students (81.1%) and the lowest high school graduation rate (73.8%) in America. Although English is often a second language for Puerto Rican students, they have a much higher rate of English language proficiency in fourth and eighth grades (35.5%) but a lower rate of math proficiency (20.9%). Surprisingly, for Puerto Rican students who do graduate, Puerto Rico has a significantly higher rate of college attendance (51.9%). These discrepancies in student achievement are wholly unexplored in the research literature, especially in the context of the major crises faced on the island. The researcher argues that these results are partially attributable to the framework from which educational leaders work. This raises the third research question, "How have Puerto Rican education leaders used Hispanic transformational leadership to effectively manage crisis, and how is this replicable?"

Table 2.

Comparison of Education in Puerto Rico and the U.S.

Category	Puerto Rico	Houston	United States
Total Students	259,535[1]	194,607[3]	48,847,268[4]
Student Race and Ethnicity			
Hispanic Student Enrollment	100.0%[2]	62.0%[3]	28.0%[5]
White	0.0%[2]	9.5%[3]	45.8%[5]
Black Student Enrollment	0.0%[2]	22.2%[3]	15.0%[5]
Asian and Pacific Islander	0.0%[2]	4.5%[3]	5.8%[5]
Native American/Native Alaskan	0.0%[2]	n/a	0.9%[5]
Other	0.0%[2]	2.0%[3]	4.5%[5]
Economically Disadvantaged Students	81.1%[6]	79.2%[3]	76.9%[7]
High School Graduation Rate	73.8%[6]	81.0%[11]	86.0%[7]
College Attendance Rate	51.9%[6]	43.0%[12]	40.0%[8]
Students Achieving Math Proficiency	20.9%[6]	28.0%[13]	24.5%[9]
Students Achieving Reading Proficiency	35.5%[6]	18.5%[14]	25.5%[10]

1-NCES (2022b); 2- Public School Review (2022); 3-Houston ISD (2022a); 4-NEA (2022); 5-Statisa (2022); 6-Departamento de Educación de Puerto Rico (2022); 7-U.S. Dept. of Agriculture (2021); 8-NCES (2022a); 9-NAEP (2022a); 10-NAEP (2022b); 11-Houston ISD (2021); 12-Houston ISD (2022b); 143-NCES (2019a, 2019b); 13-NCES (2019c, 2019d).

The past eight years have been disastrous for *Puertorriqueños*, despite the fact that our people were told we weren't experiencing a "real catastrophe." Academic research has largely

ignored the impact of natural disasters on K-12 education, which for Puerto Rico was exacerbated by the pandemic (see Table 3). Between 2012 and 2022, Puerto Rico saw a 42.7% decrease in students enrolled in public schools. The percentage of economically disadvantaged students rose from 74.2% to 81.1%. The percentage of students achieving proficiency dropped in 2022 for both math (-8.4%) and reading (-11.0%). Despite the challenges faced by students and a drop in per-pupil expenditures (down $179 between 2017 and 2022), the graduation rate rose by 9.3% over this same decade, speaking to the resilience of students, families, and educators. And raising questions about what really drives student achievement.

Table 3.

Snapshots of Education in Puerto Rico (Departamento, 2022)

Category	Before María 2012	After María 2017	Post-Pandemic 2022
Total Students	452,740	346,096	259,535
Year-to-Year Drop	n/a	-23.6%	-25.0%
Puerto Rican (Puertoriqueña)	98.3%	98.1%	98.1%
Economically Disadvantaged Students	74.1%	74.2%	81.1%
Students Achieving Math Proficiency	29.3%	32.7%	20.9%
Students Achieving Reading Proficiency	46.5%	48.8%	35.5%
High School Graduation Rate	64.5%	74.9%	73.8%
College Attendance Rate	n/a	51.87%	n/a

During the five-year assessment void (September 2017 to September 2022), valuable insights into student needs went largely undocumented. The researcher's 2023 research revealed that student achievement fell by three grade levels. As the 2022–2023 school year started, sixth graders lacked third grade skills; one director reported ninth grade students who couldn't read. In the aftermath of Hurricane Fiona in September 2022, *Puertorriqueños* once again faced challenges with basic services, technology, and infrastructure. Teachers tried to address substantial learning gaps for students who were already struggling with significant levels of subsistence insecurity in their daily lives, unhealed trauma, and social-emotional issues. These challenges have the real potential to prevent students' entry into higher education and relegate young *Puertorriqueños* to lifelong low skill, low wage jobs. For older students, this threatens their ability to achieve productive adulthood.

METHODOLOGY

This research study asked three research questions. First, what practices of Puerto Rican education leaders might be implemented on the mainland to close the achievement gap for Hispanic students? Second, what does it mean to be a Hispanic transformational leader in education? Third, how have Puerto Rican education leaders used transformational leadership to effectively manage crisis, and how is this replicable? Grounded in the practice of *testimonio*, the researcher interviewed a total of seven education leaders at two points in time (i.e., 2012 and 2022) to explore how leaders responded to crisis. The researcher explored changes in leadership across three points in time—before Hurricane María, after Hurricane María, and after the pandemic.

Testimonio

Testimonio has been described as the "verbal journey of a witness;" it is a means of healing, empowerment, and advocacy for a more humane present and future" (Huber, 2009, p. 644). *Testimonio* is a methodological necessity as many of the researcher's colleagues in Puerto Rico are unable to speak out for fear of reprisals. The methodology of *testimonio* returns the power of voice and selfhood. *Testimonio* legitimizes *Puertorriqueños'* lived experiences and validates the knowledge of our people and our voices silenced within the Eurocentric structures of power and privilege (Pérez Huber & Villanueva, 2019). The goal of *testimonio* is social change and social justice. Its power lies in its anonymity and the collective voice of the oppressed. In this way, our voices may reflect the experiences of our Black and Brown peers on the U.S. mainland.

The researcher argues that this data constitutes longitudinal data, a notion that flies in the face of traditional academic research. The researcher asserts that this novel methodology is necessary in emerging areas of scholarship, especially when unfunded research is conducted by a marginalized scholar drawing from the lived experiences and wisdom of marginalized people living in constant crisis.

Participants

Participants in this qualitative research study were district-level educators and principals who agreed to take part in semi-structured interviews. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling supported by snowball sampling (Creswell, 2012). In 2012, five participants were interviewed, one district leaders and four principals. Efforts were made to re-interview the same participants in 2022; however, this was only possible with one participant, a prominent district leader. The other participants from the original 2012 sample had, by 2022, left teaching or moved from Puerto Rico. The 2022 interviews included the district leader interviewed in 2012 and two principals who were interviewed for the first time in 2022. To protect their identities, the voices of participants are represented as a collective voice representing educators in Puerto Rico.

Data Collection

Data was collected in 2012 and 2022 using semi-structured interview protocols that took between 60 and 90 minutes. Interviews took place in Spanish and were conducted virtually; they were recorded with permission from the participants. The two interview protocols were different, with the latter interviews focusing on change in education, teaching, and educational leadership over the previous 12 years, which encompassed Hurricane María, the pandemic, and Hurricane Fiona. The researcher also took low-inference notes during the interviews.

Participants signed an informed consent form. They were free to refuse to participate in the study or to withdraw consent at any time. They were recorded with permission. Data is presented in the collective through the use of *testimonio*, so participants' identities remain confidential. Participants weren't compensated for their participation.

Data Analysis

Recorded interviews were transcribed in Spanish and translated into English by the researcher for the convenience of non-Spanish speaking readers. Interview data were deductively coded for keywords using a codebook aligned with the theoretical framework (Saldaña, 2009). Inductive

coding was used for keywords that repeated, but were not identified in the codebook (i.e., new findings). Keywords were then clustered into themes using thematic analysis. Trustworthiness and credibility were addressed through triangulation of interview data with the research literature and quantitative data as well as peer review (Creswell, 2012).

Data from the 2012 interviews only were published in 2014 (Flores Caballero, 2014). The change described in this article was addressed in two ways. First, the 2012 interview data were reexamined and compared to the 2022 data. Second, the interviews conducted in 2022 included specific questions pertaining to the change educators had experienced, comparing three points in time—before Hurricane María, after Hurricane María, and after the pandemic. To distinguish between the two sets of interview data, where *testimonio* prevents the assignment of pseudonyms, the researcher uses (2012) and (2022) with each quote as attribution.

FINDINGS

Finding One: The Role of *Comunidad* and *Familia* in Hispanic Culture

The first finding validates the importance of positioning this research in the context of *comunidad* (community) and *familia* (family) in Hispanic culture. Unlike dominant White culture, which is rooted in individualism and competition, Hispanic culture—and consequently Hispanic educational leadership—is rooted in *comunidad* and *familia.* An senior education leader described the seamless relationship between schools and *comunidad* in Puerto Rico as an apostolate focused on a shared mission, "We keep our community fully integrated into the school. We really are more than anything an apostolate. We serve the community all the time, we are here to help everyone who comes" (2022).

School centered in *comunidad* requires everyone to take responsibility. This contrasts with mainland schools rooted in hierarchy, where parents, community leaders, and government entities set expectations for schools, which are often met with resistance or resentment by educators. *Comunidad* doesn't allow educators in Puerto Rico to turn a blind eye and a cold shoulder to the suffering of our fellow *Puertorriqueños*. Furthermore, *Puertorriqueños* see our relationship between students, families, schools, and communities in the context of shared responsibility, which builds a foundation for future generations. A participant pointed out, "We solve all the problems together. The problems aren't mine; the school isn't mine. The school belongs to everyone. You are responsible for what happens here. . . we are birds of passage" (2012). As "*aves de paso*" (birds of passage), *Puertorriqueños* live a metaphor for hope for the future; we are collectively building the foundation for education for future generations. The centrality of *comunidad* (community) and the sense of *solidaridad* (solidarity) shapes how many of us solve problems in our schools from a place of *esperanza* (hope).

Finding Two: Components of Hispanic Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership at the intersection of Hispanic culture has barely been explored, and only one work of scholarship explores this critical issue in the context of K-12 education using the methodology of *testimonios* (del Monte, 2022). The research findings suggest that there are three core values of Hispanic culture that guide transformational leadership in K-12 education:

- *Comunidad* (community): increasing psychological safety by building trust and acting with integrity (i.e., keeping your promises)
- *Solidaridad* (solidarity): motivating, coaching, and developing others in a way that strengthens cohesion, commitment, performance, and retention
- *Esperanza* (hope, the metaphor of birds of passage): working with intentionality to build a stronger foundation for the future through innovation

These components map onto a new framework, described below, that emerged from the interview data and provides a compelling new lens for viewing leadership which holds tremendous potential for all leaders, particularly those responsible for the growing population of Hispanic students and especially in times of transition and crisis.

Component One: *Comunidad*, Build a Productive School Climate

The first finding that begins to build this new framework is *comunidad*. *Comunidad* speaks to the Wallace Foundation's (2013) leadership attribute of building a productive school climate and transformational leadership's key characteristics of increasing psychological safety by building trust and acting with integrity. Educators in Puerto Rico communicate with families, seeing the whole child and their family. We show deep care and consistency as we take action when a child or their family doesn't have physical or emotional safety. An African adage advises that it takes a village to raise a child and this is a guiding principle for educational leadership in Puerto Rico. Our Puerto Rican village raises the child, and their family, through three core practices: (a) the sharing of food, (b) maintaining physical and psychological safety, and (c) empowering teachers.

The Sharing of Food

The interview data showed that a key to *comunidad* as a leadership attribute is the sharing of food and meals. After Hurricane María, many students lived with food insecurity and social workers visited homes to make sure families had food. The atmosphere inside the school was "*de unidad*" (of unity, 2022). This sense of unity continued during the pandemic, and it wasn't just schools helping students. After Hurricane María, "we were even more supportive" (2022) of our students and families; teachers distributed boxes of food, principals looked for food for their teachers.

In the aftermath of Hurricane María, as the pandemic worsened, many educational leaders lacked money for graduations and many outdoor venues hadn't been rebuilt. Some municipalities lent schools stages to set up in parking lots for graduation. Schools had no money for awards or caps and gowns. Educators gave boxes of food at graduation; parents took home meals after graduation. That improved "the ties between us and the [school] climate" (2022). The Puerto Rican mindset was, "Your pain is my pain. If you don't have it, I'll give it to you" (2022).

The sharing of food is an ancient tradition that has deep meaning in many cultures (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002). The sharing of food is particularly symbolic in Hispanic culture (Song et al., 2022). Through the simple sharing of food, *Puertorriqueños* bonded, built trust, fostered a sense of safety for our community, and created positive school climates that have endured to the present day.

Maintaining Physical and Psychological Safety

Puerto Rico has always been a poor country, but poverty has heightened as a consequence of two hurricanes and the pandemic. Educational leaders had to deal with the physical and emotional

safety of students, teachers, and families on a regular basis. Before Hurricane María, many educators felt like senior leaders had forgotten about school climate; like mainland U.S. schools, educators overly focused on compliance. But after Hurricane María, educators became more sensitive to "that human part of each individual" (2022). *Puertorriqueños* moved towards "the socio-emotional side" to improve "the quality of healthy coexistence" for students and staff (2012).

Puertorriqueños used our limited resources to work together effectively as educators strived to ensure students and staff would have "a happy community" (2012). After Hurricane María, if a child didn't return to school, educators worried and everyone pitched in. The climate improved substantially as students and teachers became more empathetic about the situation. This is how *Puertorriqueños* care for each other and how we lead with love. During the pandemic, a seventh grade student logged in to a class and he was cooking pork chops alone in his house. The teacher was scared he would burn himself; the teacher looped in the social worker on the other phone line. Educators were there with that child and "became one with the child" (2022).

Since the pandemic, *Puertorriqueños* have seen serious problems in homes; educators refer families, primarily mothers, to the municipal women's office for help. A big part of this problem has been that Puerto Rico had many fathers who went to prison in 2013 due to the escalation of drug law enforcement, not unlike the disproportionate incarceration of Black men on the U.S. mainland; many of the men began their release after Hurricane María, simultaneous to the onset of the pandemic. As fathers were released home, they often had trouble reintegrating with their families. Mothers would come to schools for help. For educators, this constituted a part of *comunidad* and *solidaridad*; *Puertorriqueños* know the importance of supporting families:

> *If I don't take care of mom, I can't take care of the boy, because the boy doesn't live alone. He isn't going to learn. So, in terms of the community, we have had to work on some situations that arise that we didn't have before.* (2022)

Psychological safety and healthy relationships have remained solid, and educators helped many students. A 2022 interview participant described a mother who had taken her six children out of school during the pandemic. The principal worked with her so the children could get used to school again. The children were "incredibly happy to be back in school with their friends; you could see it on their faces" (2022). More extraordinary, the other students were very empathetic; they were so happy and relieved to see each other again. Children said, "They are finally here. So good. We are going to be together" (2022).

Higgins et al. (2022) studied New York City public schools, a system similarly confronted with pervasive uncertainty and calls for change, using a survey with 545 schools over three years (N = 170,000). They found that school performance was fostered in conditions where psychological safety is relatively low, and accountability is relatively high. This contrasts with and confirms the educational landscape in Puerto Rico, where both psychological safety and accountability are high due to the commitment to *comunidad*.

In a longitudinal study on burnout using survey data from 20 rural schools in Idaho (N = 769), Fleming et al. (2023) identified several risk factors for educator burnout (i.e., lack of connectedness, low psychological safety, and unsupportive leadership). Results showed that connectedness and

psychological safety predicted burnout. Researchers argued that, in the aftermath of the pandemic, promoting positive relationships and psychological safety were more salient factors to reduce burnout.

Empowering Teachers

A participant in the 2022 interviews described the challenges during the pandemic. This principal shared a story about a teacher who created a graduation plan, but a parent wanted a celebration that would put people at risk for COVID exposure. When the teacher refused, the parent complained to the principal. The principal affirmed the position of the teacher, insisting that they wouldn't undermine the teacher's authority or autonomy.

> *I can't go above her because she is the leader, the one who knows what she is doing. We can sit down and reach a happy medium, but I will never go above the teacher, never. I respect the leadership of every teacher in the classroom.* (2022)

This created emotional safety for the teacher and modeled setting healthy boundaries with the parent. The parent was fully listened, but ultimately told "no."

Knowing that leaders will support teachers has helped mitigate teacher flight as a result of the pandemic. It maintains bonds and reinforces the sense of *comunidad* at school. Because of this strong bond, teachers stay because they feel valued and know they are part of something bigger, something that matters:

> *We feel that we are important, that we are part of the team, and that we are there because we are part of that school community. I am not alone; I call on all my parts of the school community. I like what I do, and I like to respect my colleagues.* (2022)

Hurricane María and the pandemic posed unique challenges to education in Puerto Rico mitigated by our ability to live the value of *comunidad* through face-to-face, empathetic systems where educators consistently "faced each other" (2022). In one of the participant's schools, a doctoral student completed a thesis on school culture change as a new principal arrived. The principal shared that after reading the completed thesis:

> *I understood that I should be well satisfied. Because the teachers said what school was like before versus what school is like now. . . how it has changed, in the structure of the school, how the children have received more respect. The respect of the parents towards the school. (2012)*

In a longitudinal study of middle school writing teachers, Dierking et al. (2012) found that autonomy sustained teacher empowerment and support strengthened teachers; conversely, disempowering forces negatively affected teaching and learning. Ortan et al. (2021) surveyed 658 K-12 teachers in Romania, a developing country, finding that self-efficacy (i.e., teacher empowerment) contributed to a positive school climate where teachers and students thrived. Teacher self-efficacy also had a considerable influence on teacher job satisfaction, increasing teacher well-being and engagement and decreasing turnover and burnout

Through three simple practices—(a) the sharing of food, (b) maintaining physical and psychological safety, and (c) empowering teachers—educators honored a commitment to Hispanic

values of *comunidad* and built a productive school climate. This is the power of *comunidad* as a core leadership attribute.

Component Two: *Solidaridad,* Facilitate Collaboration

The second finding that supports the new framework described below is *solidaridad*. This speaks to the Wallace Foundation's (2013) leadership attribute of facilitating collaboration as well as transformational leadership's key characteristics of motivating, coaching, and developing others in a way that strengthens cohesion, commitment, performance, and retention. In Puerto Rico, this entailed (a) collaboration and distributed leadership and (b) supporting teachers.

Collaboration and Distributed Leadership

Key to *solidaridad* is Puerto Rican leaders' unwillingness to embrace hierarchy. A senior district leader described their views on distributed leadership, "Look, I am not the school. We are all the school, and if I am not there, the school is going to fall on us, because there are others who have the capacity to handle it. (2012). This willingness to share power is rooted in deep *humilidad* (humility), as described by a principal preparing for an extended leave.

> *What I needed to do was prepare [a replacement] so that when I left, he would stay, that he would have the same sensitivity, a human being above all. I was away for two weeks, and he directed the school better than if I had done it myself. (2012)*

Collaborative leadership is extended to teachers and staff as well, including collaborative decision-making. Education leaders in Puerto Rico believe that solutions lie with teachers. Leaders take problems to teachers and ask them for potential solutions. Reflection is key to this process.

> *I can't sit here and say, "Oh, well, look at that problem over there. That's the teacher's problem." No. That's sitting down with the teacher, [saying], "Look, I did it like this, see if it works for you." In other words, it is to seek the solution among all. Everything, everything we do like this.* (2012)

When you make teachers part of the problem-solving process, you already have the solution. This strategy of shared leadership is a key part of educational resilience in Puerto Rico. A participant noted that before Hurricane María, *Puertorriqueños* had numerous highly trained personnel who helped to "recreate those same communities" (2022) during the recovery efforts. We moved forward "because everyone collaborates" (2022).

A robust literature supports the importance of distributed leadership in K-12 education. For example, Liu et al. (2021) asserted that distributed leadership is positively and directly associated with job satisfaction, and positively but indirectly associated with self-efficacy. Similarly, Bellibaş et al. (2021) found that distributed leadership positively but indirectly influences job satisfaction, mediated by teacher collaboration.

Supporting Teachers

Interview participants in 2012, before Hurricane María, reported consistently offering workshops, coaching, and instructional evaluations. When Hurricane María hit, this stopped completely; educators were constantly running and rarely had time to stop to think about what to do next. Before the pandemic, schools always had teachers and staff who would go the extra mile. Principals in 2012 noted that teachers would come in on Saturday and Sunday; in the 2022 interviews, after

Hurricane María and during the pandemic, many teachers were afraid of working with students; teachers didn't feel prepared, they lost control. Principals described their frustration because staff were trained but they couldn't handle students in the classroom. One principal noted that the change was "extremely impressive" (2022).

After Hurricane María, educational leaders unanimously noted the need to help teachers to stabilize physically and emotionally. Principals helped teachers find water and food. Principals cleaned the schools themselves and did repairs. One participant posed the question, "Can you imagine teachers on the mainland doing that? That didn't happen after Katrina or Harvey, teachers cleaning out and repairing schools" (2022).

With the pandemic, educators were present from day one. They proudly reported that schools didn't have the conflicts they heard about on the mainland. *Puertorriqueños* wanted to open their schools in March 2020, weeks into the pandemic, because, as a senior leader noted, "educators were fully prepared, and we wanted to be in school with our students. Staff reported, we practiced social distancing, and they were here giving the extra mile" (2022). A principal shared how a custodian sat on a chair outside the bathroom, making sure students washed their hands, disinfecting every child's hands with hand sanitizer. At some schools, there was not a single case of COVID.

Again, a broad literature supports the importance of supporting teacher well-being in K-12 education. For example, a Rand Corporation study (Steiner et al., 2022) found that a lack of well-being and an adverse working climate were associated with intention to leave; researchers recommended building positive adult relationships to ease pandemic-related stress. An earlier study by Zee and Koomen (2016) found that teacher's psychological well-being (i.e., personal accomplishment, job satisfaction, and commitment) and self-efficacy were related.

Component Three: *Esperanza,* Instructionally Focused Interactions with Teachers and Strategic Management

The third finding that supports the new framework described below is *esperanza*. This speaks to the Wallace Foundation's (2013) leadership attributes of managing personnel and resources strategically and engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers; it addresses transformational leadership's key characteristics of working with intentionality to build a stronger foundation for the future through innovation. Education leaders in Puerto Rico have a deep sense of responsibility for our students, making sure they reach productive adulthood:

> *I cannot live with remorse that I didn't do anything, that one of those who is here now, tomorrow is selling drugs on the corner or is watching over who enters and leaves the community. I couldn't live with that, so I have to continue to be what I am.* (2012)

As education leaders in Puerto Rico, participants in 2012 and 2022 expressed consensus; they felt the same way about their teachers and other people they lead. This is why collaborative leadership is so important. Educators agreed that if they want to be good leaders, they have to create leaders who are better than they are. If educators want a better future for children, they have to nurture leaders who create better learning environments and empower students. In 2012 in one of the schools, 70% of teachers had earned a master's degree in the subject they taught.

Puerto Rico had teachers pursuing doctorates. A participant in 2012 shared how every time one of their colleagues earned a degree, *Puertorriqueños* felt like it is ours. “That for me is mine, it's mine. I think that I, my leadership, is well shared” (2012).

Educators in Puerto Rico model *esperanza* and resilience for our students, showing them that they too can achieve their dreams. We are *aves de paso,* birds of passage. As *Puertorriqueños*, we are building a new foundation for education for our grandchildren’s grandchildren. A participant described how educators in Puerto Rico saw parents as “transcendental” because teachers know we “cannot do everything . . . those values that we instilled in them; the parents are the base” (2012).

For students, *esperanza* is a way to develop identity amid crisis, to find purpose in life when life seems bleak, and to embrace a growth mindset (Lee & Jang, 2018). Education leaders work to empower students, to give them a voice, and to help them make positive choices. *Esperanza* fosters learning and academic achievement as well as driving respect our shared heritage and our differences.

Finding Three: A Hispanic Framework for Transformational Leadership

The Wallace Foundation framework (2013) focused on four key leadership attributes for K-12 educational leaders, grounded in transformational leadership: engage in instructionally focused interactions with teachers, build a productive school climate, facilitate collaboration and professional learning communities, and manage personnel and resources strategically

Figure 1.

A Hispanic Framework for Transformational Leadership in Education

Hispanic Value	Wallace Foundation (2013) Framework	Key Attributes of Transformational Leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1995)
Comunidad	Build a productive school climate	• Increasing psychological safety by building trust and acting with integrity
Solidaridad	Facilitate collaboration and professional learning communities	Motivating, coaching, and developing others in a way that strengthens cohesion, commitment, performance, and retention
Esperanza	Manage personnel and resources strategically and engage in instructionally focused interactions with teachers	• Working with intentionality to build a stronger foundation for the future through innovation

Our Puerto Rican village raises the child, and their family, through three core practices of *comunidad*: (a) the sharing of food, (b) maintaining physical and psychological safety, and (c) empowering teachers. We promote *solidaridad* through (a) collaboration and distributed leadership and (b) supporting teachers. We are *aves de paso*, birds of passage, living the value of *esperanza* and building a future for grandchildren we will never meet. These three components that clearly

emerged in the interview data—*comunidad, solidaridad, and esperanza*—align with the Wallace (2013) framework and key factors of a transformational leadership style rooted in Hispanic culture. These data suggest a powerful new framework for transformational leadership in K-12 education when mapped onto the seminal Wallace framework (see Figure 1). It is important to note that the Hispanic framework for transformational leadership in education doesn't reject frameworks established by the dominant culture, but it does require that distinctions of transformational leadership be applied in a culturally relevant manner at the intersection of Hispanic tradition, culture, values, and worldview.

Analysis and Implications

Like all citizens of the world, *Puertorriqueñas* know that our children are our future and education is the key to our shared success. Together, sharing a meal, *Puertorriqueños* will find a way to adapt to endless crises and find innovative solutions. There is no manual for communities or schools to reimagine the future or to rebuild a broken educational system. There is an urgent need for such a framework to guide our nation in building essential skills and preparing individuals, leaders, and teams for the next crisis. This is the lesson that education leaders in Puerto Rico offer.

This preparation must be holistic, utilizing best practices in education, social-emotional learning, mental health, physical wellbeing, and family support. The interview data presented here point to a need for holistic preparation not unique to Puerto Rico but national, and perhaps even global, in scale as educators continue to struggle to move beyond the pandemic. The interview data demonstrates that Puerto Rican educational leaders have found a roadmap and a new model for education that may be relevant to educators on the mainland and around the world regarding crisis leadership in K-12 education.

Transferable Practices to Close the Achievement Gap for Hispanic Students

The first research question asked, "What practices of Puerto Rican education leaders might be implemented on the mainland to close the achievement gap for Hispanic students?"

This is a critical issue for U.S. education given that the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Gardner, 2024) reported that 40% of students in American K-12 classrooms will be ELLs by 2030. Association recommendations focused on inclusive education and creating a welcoming space for families and well as systemic change (e.g., teacher preparation, ongoing professional development). While systemic change falls outside the locus of control for principals and teachers, the findings from this study provide robust areas for small, localized change. This is supported by the research literature which shows that closing the representation gap closes the achievement gap (Talbert-Johnson, 2004; Valencia, 2015). Here, the representation gap can include not just seeing people of similar race and ethnicity but also the familiarity of cultural practices. Additionally, Tinkler (2002) pointed out that a barrier to Hispanic parent engagement is the dominant White culture's tendency to focus on competitiveness rather than cooperation.

The sharing of food builds community in many cultures (Mintz & Du Bois, 2002), benefiting all children; but it is especially important in Hispanic culture (Song et al., 2022). The sharing of food builds trust, safety, and positive climate which promotes strong relationships. Schools on the mainland can increase their focus on the sharing of food as a way to welcome families, create

inclusion, and promote cultural relevance. Schools could host potlucks for new families, or all families. Parents can be invited to sit with their children during breakfast or lunch. In light of the new presidential administration, this will need to be done with caution, protecting undocumented families from ICE raids. A safer option might be for schools to work with PTAs and local businesses to send gifts of food home with children tied to special occasions. This doesn't have to be the traditional dinner basket for Thanksgiving or Christmas; this could be a small bag of oranges at Christmas or a dozen cookies at Valentine's Day.

This study found that taking time for students to share their home lives improved *comunidad*, a culturally responsive practice well-documented to increase student engagement and motivation, which improves achievement (Hernandez, 2022). Teachers can make an extra effort with their Hispanic ELLs to call or send a note home; AI translation software makes it relatively easy to bridge language barriers.

Providing robust family support, central to education in Puerto Rico during crises, is also cited in the research literature (Taggart, 2018). While school budgets are often tight, resources exist in most communities to provide newcomer and low-income families with food, clothing, housing assistance, and legal support.

Hispanic Transformational Leadership in Education

The second research question asked, "What does it mean to be a Hispanic transformational leader in education?

Education leaders at the building level are key determinants of culture and climate. The first finding in this study demonstrates the importance of culture—*comunidad* and *familia*—in creating a nurturing environment that facilitates change. At the building level, this entails a mindset that school belongs to everyone. School and the community are interdependent, with everyone (i.e., school staff, students, and families) taking equal responsibility.

A widely-read metanalysis by Tinkler (2002) demonstrated the positive influence on academic achievement when parents participate in their children's education. However, in contrast to the school-parent relationships for *Puertorriqueños* described by interview participants, Tinkler (2002) asserted that Hispanic parents respect teachers but believe parental interference is rude and disrespectful—behavior which U.S. mainland educators often interpret as uncaring. The strong commitment to *comunidad* in Puerto Rico challenges this notion of Hispanic culture. This researcher argues that Tinkler's (2002) literature review, more than two decades old, failed to understand the deep context for education among Hispanic families which strongly emerged in the current study. This assertion is supported by later research by Murakami et al. (2016) who found Hispanic leadership is predominantly democratic (57.5%) and delegative (24.5%). Thus, goals, expectations, and problem-solving must be co-created by all key stakeholders.

At a more granular level, district and building leaders can embrace Hispanic transformational leadership by empowering teachers (i.e., *comunidad*) and adopting collaboration and distributed leadership (i.e., *solidaridad*). At the district level, embracing Hispanic transformational leadership makes school leadership more accessible and inviting to aspiring Hispanic leaders, alleviating the perception that to be an education leader an individual must give up their Hispanic identity,

leadership style, and values (Martinez et al., 2022). This addresses two critical needs in education: building the leadership pipeline and increasing representation (Talbert-Johnson, 2004; Valencia, 2015).

At the building level, embracing Hispanic transformational leadership creates greater teacher engagement and improves retention, especially for marginalized groups (Mvana, 2024; Shibiti, 2020). In an era of increasing racial tensions, this can help Hispanic teachers, staff, and administrators connect to and engage with their work as educators by creating (a) meaning by understanding how instruction contributes to student achievement and (b) psychological safety nurtured through effective communication, collaboration, and a culture of trust (Mvana, 2024).

Crisis and Transformational Leader in Education

The third research question asked, "How have Puerto Rican education leaders used transformational leadership to effectively manage crisis, and how is this replicable?

First and foremost, the proposed framework is grounded in *solidaridad* where school belongs to everyone. Nevertheless, principals must proactively facilitate the creation of a shared vision and inspire educators, students, and families to see what is possible. Vision and meaning making are even more important for crisis leadership (Reyes-Guerra et al., 2021). Moving through the next four years of an administration focused on dismantling education and culturally responsive teaching, this will be one more burden education leaders must shoulder if we want all students to achieve their full potential. Truly, education leaders are *aves de paso*, birds of passage, as school communities move through times of challenge.

The interview data pointed to the importance of educational leaders promoting emotional intelligence that empowers relationships (Aguilar Yuste, 2021). This starts with supporting and taking care of teachers with empathy and compassion so teachers can show empathy and compassion for students and their families. It means building self-awareness by asking teachers and staff how they feel and helping them to see the value of the emotional contribution they make when they take the time to listen to students or visit families in their homes. These simple actions build and maintain physical and psychological safety *(comunidad).*

Leaders must find ways to focus on teacher well-being. Amid the pandemic, with testing approaching, teachers' stress and anxiety became unmanageable. One principal reported their staff just began to scream. They found free programs for aromatherapy, meditation, and yoga. "And little by little educators stabilized them, but it was . . . very hard" (2022). With simple acts, educational leaders in Puerto Rico provided support and began to address unhealed trauma (Hough, 2014).

Finally, in the framework proposed here, grounded in *comunidad,* principals, teachers, parents, students, and community work together—especially in times of crisis. This may mean taking on jobs that aren't in a job description, like cleaning schools, providing basic supplies, and making sure students have food. There is tremendous power and meaning in a sack of rice or a bag of flour. In Puerto Rico, our students and families don't see educational leaders complain. Educators focus on the task at hand—rooted in *comunidad*, *solidaridad*, and *esperanza*—with an eye to the big vision.

Conclusion: Lessons from Puerto Rico's Educational Leaders

America needs to promote a different kind of education leadership to make sure we achieve education excellence for all students. Given the reality that America will soon be minority White with 40% of students predicted to be ELLs by 2030, most of whom will be Spanish-speaking, transformational leadership grounded in a Hispanic framework of seeing and knowing the world makes sense.

In Puerto Rico, we have three cultural traditions that root us and shape our identity as *Puertorriqueñas*: Spanish culture with its spirit of adventure, Taino culture with its connection to community, and African culture with its vibrant rhythm. These diverse cultural traditions live in our DNA and help us face challenges as one people with adaptability and flexibility. This resilience is grounded in three core values of Hispanic culture: *comunidad*, *solidaridad*, *y esperanza*. *Puertorriqueños* clearly have the capacity to rebuild, grow, and thrive. The key question is whether the ethos and the structures of the dominant White culture can embrace their own rebuilding from an asset-based mindset strength, rooted in Hispanic identity and cultural values:

- *Comunidad* (Community): All people live, work, and play in a single interdependent network of people who value family and society over individualism, hierarchy, and personal power.
- *Solidaridad* (Solidarity): Community is grounded in a collective sense of responsibility for all members such that all people help each other, share resources, and willingly yield individual rights in service to the good of the whole.
- *Esperanza* (Hope): Life may be hard, but no person ever yields to despair because courageous, resilient people remind us that we have overcome many things, and we will continue to fight for a better future for our grandchildren's grandchildren.

Our identity and values are the foundation of our resilience, our ability to never lose the spirit of kindness and compassion. Our educators, students, families, and communities haven't lost hope that things will be better. Our educational leaders continue to lead, even without support from the mainland and in the face of significant external barriers. When you give *Puertorriqueños* lemons, we make lemonade. And, lacking resources, *Puertorriqueños* will be creative and find a way to serve you lunch with your lemonade.

As educators struggle to move beyond the pandemic and enormous learning deficits, this is an ideal time to do things differently. Community, solidarity, and hope—along with compassion and empathy—aren't core values typically espoused by educational leaders on the mainland. These core values are not linked to student achievement. It isn't easy to measure the impact of initiatives to promote social-emotional wellbeing and transformational leadership, especially with the focus on test scores. But *Puertorriqueñas* know that this is the key: *comunidad, solidaridad, y esperanza*.

Educational leaders in Puerto Rico bring encouragement and a certainty that the future is going to be better. The framework presented here is rooted in a shared concern: that our children and our nation thrive. Change will start small, as all change does, but it will require critical mass to realize meaningful transformation in education. As *Puertorriqueños,* we hope to inspire our fellow citizens to deepen their awareness that schools are in essence communities of people, with all their strengths and vulnerabilities. *Comunidad* has tremendous untapped power to determine what happens in our schools. Politicians and governmental structures aren't the true source of power.

Communities need to realize that working together in *solidaridad* with principals and teachers is where true power lies. This is perhaps the biggest asset and the most important lesson for education in America. Unlike Puerto Rico, in the aftermath of two devastating hurricanes and a global pandemic, *Puertorriqueñas* haven't forgotten that we as individuals have to change so that our children grow into productive citizens who pass on the ability to thrive in the face of any obstacle. As a senior district leader said more than a decade ago

Estoy satisfecha porque ha dado fruto.

I am satisfied because it has borne fruit. (2012)

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