<Article>

Educational Leadership in Mexico, Spain, and the United States: Cross-Cultural Implications

Charles-L. Slater

//Abstract

Leadership is important in schools to promote student achievement and well-being. This paper undertakes a review of the literature that suggests that a school principal can make a difference by having an impact on the intervening variables, in particular in enhancing teacher motivation. The cultural differences between Mexico, Spain, and the United States are examined and related to leadership practices. Each country could benefit from examining the practices of the other and from adopting ways of proceeding that might modify or run counter to their prevailing cultural norms. A unifying approach that might be applied in all three countries is centered on the practices of transformational leadership.

// Author's information

Charles-L. Slater: is Professor of Educational Leadership at California State University Long Beach. He previously served as professor at Texas State University San Marcos and was superintendent of schools in Texas and Massachusetts. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, his MAT from Occidental College-Los Angeles, and his B.A. from the University of Minnesota.

He has published widely on educational leadership including articles in the Educational Administration Quarterly. the Journal of Educational Administration, the Educational Forum, Revista Iberoamericana sobre Calidad, Eficacia y Cambio en Educación, the Journal of School Leadership, Education and Society, the International Journal of Leadership in Education, Educational Management and Leadership and Revista Mexicana de Investigación Educativa.

His research has focused on what is needed for successful leadership in the U.S., Mexico, and Costa Rica with special attention to educational administration preparation. Much of this work has been conducted with the International Study of Principal Preparation (ISPP) a collaboration of researchers in thirteen countries. Charles.Slater@csulb.edu

Universitat de Barcelona. Institut de Ciències de l'Educació

Charles-L. Slater, *Educational Leadership in Mexico, Spain, and the United States…*

1. Introduction

Improving schools is a vital concern for countries around the world since education holds the key to economic development for those languishing in poverty as well as for those who have achieved economic success. In developing countries just a small increase in funding can have a significant impact on student achievement, while investment in teacher training, school buildings, and learning materials can provide the foundations for learning (UNESCO, 2000). In developed countries, where investment has already been made in such infrastructure, the path to improving schools may require more subtle changes in areas such as curriculum design, the use of test data, and professional development for teachers. In both cases, however, the role of leadership is critical and here the school principal or director's task is to help match resources to the needs of the school to coordinate the efforts of parents, students, and teachers.

2. Leadership Matters

Beginning with studies of the so-called "effective schools" in the 70s (Edmonds, 1979), the role of the principal has acquired increasing emphasis as a means for enhancing student learning. Murillo (2006) built on this model for effective schools to promote the concept of "effective school improvement". However, the influence of the principal does not have a direct bearing on student learning. Rather, the principal impacts other variables, most notably the school's organization and teacher motivation. These variables in turn have a direct impact on learning. Indeed, Hallinger and Heck (1997) found that a principal's leadership made a consistent, albeit small, contribution to student achievement as mediated through other variables.

Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) cited four sets of leadership practices necessary to improve student achievement: building vision, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing teaching and learning. Day, Leithwood, and Sammons (2008), in reviewing the literature on student leadership, found that school directors can create an achievement culture with high expectations and that they can influence teachers through professional development, school planning, shared vision, and positive working conditions.

Pont, Nusche, and Moorman (2008) studied leadership in 21 member countries of the Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD) and recommended increased autonomy for school directors, a distribution of leadership within the school, and training for teachers. Pozner (2000) made similar recommendations for Latin America.

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) undertook a meta-analysis of 69 studies and found a correlation of 0.25 between measures of principal leadership and student achievement. The correlations were further broken down into 21 responsibilities that overlapped with other theories of leadership. For example, affirmation and contingent rewards bear obvious similarities with Kouzes and Posner's (2012) leadership practice of "encouraging the heart", while intellectual stimulation is a concept shared by Bass (1985).

Transformational leadership practices are consistent with the variables that promote student achievement. Such leadership goes beyond management to focus on the environment that a

Universitat de Barcelona. Institut de Ciències de l'Educació

Charles-L. Slater, *Educational Leadership in Mexico, Spain, and the United States…*

leader can create to motivate everyone to work toward common goals and to participate in the development of ever more ambitious objectives. Incorporating these key aspects of transformation, Pozner (2000) defines leadership as "the combination of processes that guide individuals and teams in a particular direction towards excellence and organizational learning primarily without coercion" (p. 9).

These variables come together in the concept of transformational leadership as based on Burns' (1978) classic study that worked with a definition of leadership that promotes increased motivation and moral commitment on the part of both the leader and the follower. The personal characteristics of the leader and the use of tools to improve efficiency are not sufficient to achieve better student outcomes. The task is to identify practices that promote transformational leadership.

Kouzes and Posner (2012) examined the best leadership experiences of thousands of leaders and offered a transformational theory in which they described five exemplary leadership practices. "Challenging the process" includes those practices that challenge the status quo; "inspiring a shared vision" describes the leader's work with others in drawing attention to the mission of education; "enabling others to act" involves fostering collaboration and building effective teams; "modeling the way" shows a leader who acts consistently with goal-related expectations for all members of the organization, and "encouraging the heart" is the recognition that the leader gives to the workers' contributions.

Slater, Boone, Price, Martinez, Alvarez, Topete, & Olea (2002) studied leadership challenges in education in Mexico and the U.S. Participants in the U.S. rated themselves highly on all of the aforementioned leadership practices and "challenging the process" was near the top of their rankings. Mexican participants, by contrast, gave themselves lower ratings and identified "encouraging the heart" as the most important practice. These results may very well reflect their respective cultural differences.

3. Variation of Culture across Countries

Hofstede (1980) published what is today a classic study of cultural differences across four dimensions. "Power distance" describes the extent to which organizational members accept an unequal distribution of power and perceive a distance between the levels of an organization. The second dimension, "individualism/collectivism", examines the extent to which people are concerned with the individual or with the group as a whole. The "masculinity/femininity" scale examines the level of competition in a society and the extent to which people strive to win and outperform each other score. Finally, "uncertainty avoidance" reflects the degree to which people are threatened by ambiguous situations. A further dimension has subsequently been added and refers to long-term or short-term orientation (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010).

The theory is arguably somewhat flawed given that the data on which it is based are now quite old, and cultural changes are likely to have occurred over the last forty years. There are also suggestions that a country's borders do not necessarily define groups that are more homogeneous than those that extend across borders (McSweeney, 2002). Nonetheless, the four

Universitat de Barcelona. Institut de Ciències de l'Educació

Charles-L. Slater, *Educational Leadership in Mexico, Spain, and the United States…*

cultural dimensions are rich with meaning and provide a means for understanding the leadership differences between Mexico and the U.S. Of course, any conclusions drawn should be treated only as possibilities.

4. "Challenging the Process" in Mexico, Spain and the U.S.

The first leadership practice that Kouzes and Posner (2012) propose is that of "challenging the process". In the best leadership experiences they describe, the leader steps forward to voice new ideas and to call for changes in established ways of doing things. This practice is more consistent with U.S. culture than it is with Mexican culture. Hofstede's (1980) survey data ranked Mexico (81) near the top and the U.S. (40) near the bottom of countries surveyed in terms of power distance. In other words, Mexican employees may be more comfortable with autocratic management and less likely to challenge authority. Mexicans (82) also ranked higher than their U.S. (46) counterparts in terms of "uncertainty avoidance" and are thus more likely to feel comfortable with traditional procedures and routines.

In Hofstede's survey of cultural differences, he asked participants whether they agreed with such statements as: "Company rules should not be broken—even when the employee thinks it's in the company's best interest" (Hofstede, 1980: 164). Agreement would reflect a tendency to value "uncertainty avoidance". Contrast this expression of a cultural value with a leadership practice from Kouzes and Posner's (1995) inventory, the leader "searches outside the formal boundaries of his or her organization for innovative ways to improve what we do." This item considers the extent to which a person is ready to challenge the process.

The "Leadership Challenge" has been investigated in several countries around the world, but there have been no specific studies in Spain, and thus, there are no data to suggest how Spanish administrators would respond to "challenging the process". What we do have, however, are data from Hofstede's (1980) study for each of the cultural dimensions in Spain, and these can be compared to the results in Mexico and the U.S.

Here again, caution must be exercised when using Hofstede's data, which were first published in 1980. Since the end of Franco's dictatorship, Spain has made a steady transition toward democracy. Its economy is now more modern and vibrant, despite the troubles of the recent economic crisis. Spain also constitutes a country that is made up of several cultures and languages. In Catalonia, the Basque Country, Andalusia, and Galicia, people may identify first with their region and only secondly with the nation of Spain. These regional differences make it difficult to speak of one national culture. Nonetheless, there are factors that unite the country and the desire for independence and self-rule are arguably common traits. With these reservations, we are able to speculate about the relationship between culture and leadership practices. Figure 1 shows that Spain (57) falls between the extremes of Mexico (81) and the United States (40) in terms of their ranking according to "power distance" and "individualism".

With a lower perception of hierarchical differences and with a more individualistic orientation than Mexico, Spain seems likely to have administrators that are more likely to "challenge the

Universitat de Barcelona. Institut de Ciències de l'Educació

Charles-L. Slater, *Educational Leadership in Mexico, Spain, and the United States...*

process". These cultural dimensions, however, are less marked than in the United States, and so Spain might be expected to rank below the U.S. in "challenging the process".
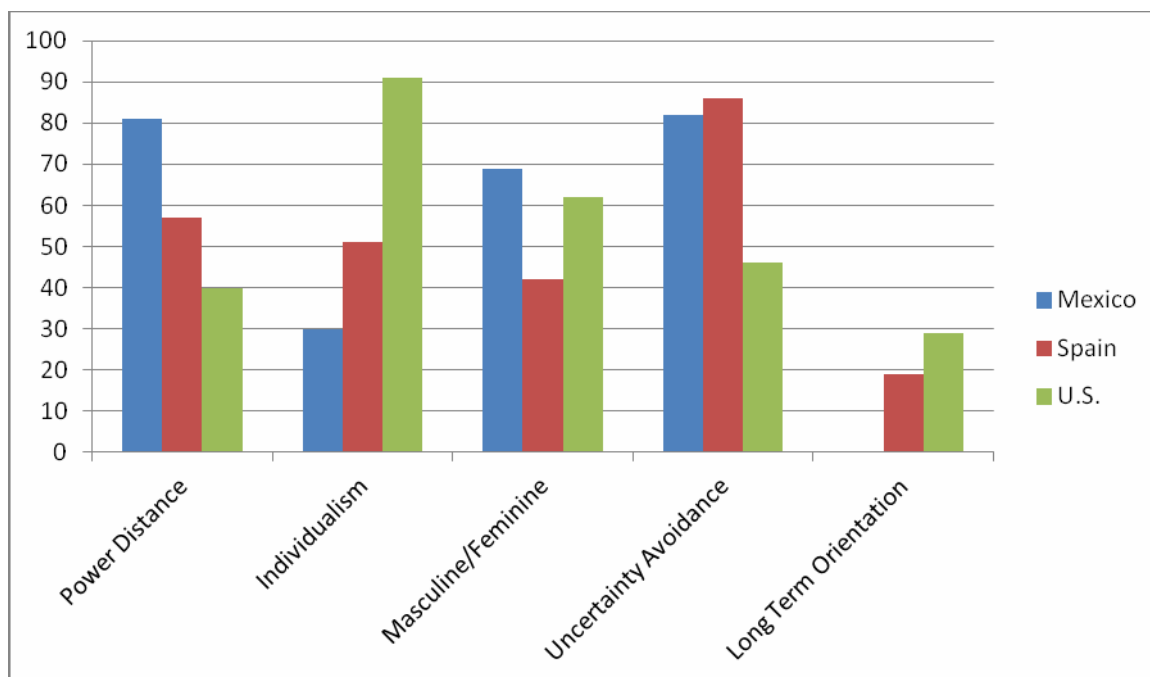

Figure 1: Cultural Dimensions in Mexico, Spain, and the United States (http://geert-hofstede.com/countries.html)

5. "Encouraging the Heart" in Mexico, Spain, and the U.S.

Slater et al. (2002) reported that Mexican educators scored lower than U.S. educators in terms of "encouraging the heart", but within the Mexican group this leadership practice was the highest ranked, while within the U.S. group it was the lowest. Some aspects of "encouraging the heart" may be highly prized in Mexico. Parties and festivals form a part of the Mexican way of life, and there are many occasions to celebrate. In the U.S. people may be less likely to mix business and pleasure, be more task-oriented, and be more likely to feel the need to move forward. In other words, there is a different orientation toward time in each country.

Hall (1983) described different cultural time orientations. In a monochronic timeframe, tasks are controlled one at a time with attention to schedules and a high level of regularity and consistency. In a polychronic timeframe, several things are done at once with a high sensitivity to context and greater orientation to people and relationships. U.S. culture seems to be more monochronic and more in keeping with the idea of "challenging the process", whereas, Mexican culture is more polychronic.

Based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions (as presented in Figure 1), Spain might also be expected to score higher than the U.S. on the "encouraging the heart" practice. Spain has a level of

Universitat de Barcelona. Institut de Ciències de l'Educació

Charles-L. Slater, *Educational Leadership in Mexico, Spain, and the United States…*

individualism (51) that lies between that of Mexico (30) and that of the U.S. (91). In a more collective society, such as Mexico or Spain, people come together in family and community groups to celebrate holidays and to keep traditions alive. Spain (19) scores lower on long-term time orientation than the U.S. (29), which could result in the immediate celebration of successes rather than postponing them to a later date.

6. Challenges facing School Principals in Mexico

Slater, Boone, and Alvarez et al. (2005) studied the challenges facing school directors in Mexico, who shared their concerns in focus groups. They identified a variety of challenges and expressed a particular frustration about the lack of teacher motivation. Some felt that the teachers with whom they worked were not interested in becoming self-actualized, but rather, saw their work in minimalist terms. One director said,

"The main challenge that I face is encountering people who feel no obligation to their jobs in education, who don't read, who don't feel the necessity of self-actualizing, who are not ready to admit their faults, and continue to justify themselves." (p. 205-06)

The school directors saw their primary challenge as finding ways to motivate teachers to improve their skills and to dedicate themselves to teaching. In other words, the directors wanted to be transformational leaders but found that teachers preferred transactional leaders with whom they could negotiate.

The challenges faced by new principals in Mexico are concerned above all with the problems they encounter in interacting with teachers because of the latter's absenteeism and lack of punctuality (Slater, Garcia, and Gorosave, 2008). At the elementary level, the double shift and the national teachers union were both identified as major concerns (Slater, Boone, Nelson, De La Colina, Garcia, Grimaldo, Rico, Rodríguez, Sirios, Womack, Garcia, & Arriaga, 2007).

López-Gorosave, Slater, and García-Garduño (2010) found that after two or three years, Mexican principals had been able to make adjustments and now reported fewer concerns and more successful strategies for dealing with problems. However, they came to accommodations with teachers at the expense of addressing student needs. In many instances, they had struck a transactional bargain by siding with the more powerful parties who could determine their survival. These findings are consistent with Daresh's (2007) conception that "beginning" principals became either risk takers or risk avoiders before achieving a period of stabilization.

Universitat de Barcelona. Institut de Ciències de l'Educació

Charles-L. Slater, *Educational Leadership in Mexico, Spain, and the United States…*

7. Promoting transformational leadership

One of the purposes of cross-cultural research is that countries might be able to learn from one another. Otherwise, educators become encapsulated in their own micro worlds rather than being able to experience alternative ways of teaching, learning, and leading. Mexico, Spain, and the U.S. may wish to adopt other practices or they may wish to keep their current practices; but, in either case, their approaches will be stronger for having examined alternatives.

In the light of the foregoing discussion, Mexico might consider leadership practices that are prepared to "challenge the process" more. Many of my Mexican graduate students have expressed a desire for more democratic institutions and for a more democratic approach within the schools in which they work. The task of developing democratic institutions is complex, and while some aspects of the culture are consistent with democratic values, others run counter to it.

Mexico faces two challenges. One is a tendency to form rigid hierarchical structures that impede the open discussion of ideas; yet, such debates are essential if democracy is to flourish. Second, there are long standing examples whereby one group has been able to dominate without opposition from other parties. The one party rule of the PRI for seventy years meant other political parties were unable to participate. In education, a strong central union has been responsible for determining policies governing personnel and curricula that might have been better devised by a greater diversity of groups.

The United States is relatively prone to "challenge the process" but could benefit from being more willing to "encourage the heart". The accountability process in the U.S. is a technical model of rewards and punishments that has perhaps made standardized test results the main goal of the system (McNeil, 2000; Slater, McGhee, Nelson, & Meno, 2011; Valenzuela, 1999). "Encouraging the heart", however, would bring greater respect and recognition for teachers and a broader curriculum in the arts, music, and physical education for children. The U.S. would be well served by an accountability process with greater "heart".

Spain is one of the few countries that implements systems for the democratic selection and appointment of principals. Candidates may put themselves forward or they may be nominated by their peers. If no single candidate obtains a majority, the educational authorities are entitled to appoint the new principal (Diez, Terrón, & Anguita, 2006). This process appears to give new school directors a number of advantages. They have a significant level of knowledge of school policies and procedures, and they know the parents, students, and teachers. They are also likely to enjoy the support of the teachers having been elected by them. The principals continue to teach some classes, serve for a specified term, and can return to a teaching position at the end of their term of office.

There are several disadvantages in the process implemented to select a principal in Spain. It does not permit the development of a profession of educational administrators with specialized preparation, who are capable of working in a variety of school settings, and who enjoy extended career appointments and recognition. Principals only receive a brief orientation class to prepare for their role in leading the school. Candidates stand from within the school and, on occasions, no teachers are willing to serve as director. After performing the job for three or four years, many

Universitat de Barcelona. Institut de Ciències de l'Educació

Charles-L. Slater, *Educational Leadership in Mexico, Spain, and the United States…*

directors return to the classroom. The salary cannot be considered to compensate for the additional work and responsibility associated with being director.

Spanish directors may also suffer a tendency to offer a vision that is limited to their experience acquired in that one school. However, additional research is needed to determine the practices of Spanish school directors. Are they "challenging the process" when necessary and "inspiring a shared vision" that motivates teachers and students?

In all three countries, school directors have expressed frustration at having to work with teachers who do not perform well in the classroom. There is little support for directors when having to confront teachers when there are problems of punctuality, absenteeism, or poor class preparation. Obstacles to the evaluation of teachers would not be surprising in a country such as Mexico where the central teachers union wields its considerable power to protect teachers. School directors in Spain are also less likely to confront teaching staff since the teachers are their former colleagues, and the director will one day have to return to his or her teaching position alongside these colleagues. Dismissing ineffective teachers would seem less problematic in the U.S. where school directors can be expected to be more likely to "challenge the process". However, the principals with whom I have worked in California list the supervision of ineffective teachers as a major problem at their schools.

"Challenging the process" and "encouraging the heart" might be the best practices for addressing teacher evaluation in each of the three countries. The guiding principles here would be the need to create an environment of strong values that may at first appear to be in competition with each other, but which ultimately are necessary for detecting workable solutions with integrity. The first value to be promoted is that the teaching profession should be highly prized, with teachers receiving frequent recognition. In this way, teachers would have a sense that what they do is important and that their opinion is valued. The second value to be promoted is for teachers to be freely critical of the school's administration and of each others' practices. A critical dimension of these characteristics could help establish an environment in which the problems of poor teaching behavior are no longer tolerated.

Each country has its cultural strengths and it should be able to draw upon these to establish the type of environment that embraces both encouragement and criticism. Antúnez (2012), a scholar with cultural roots in Spain and extensive experience in Mexico, makes broad recommendations for how directors can motivate teachers that should be consistent with all three of the cultures discussed here, the U.S., Mexico, and Spain. While it might be tempting to resort to the power of rules and authority to regulate teacher behavior, Antúnez calls on directors to appeal to the profound convictions of the teacher. This is a transformational approach that takes advantage of teachers' talents and challenges them to think. When teachers are involved in successful and satisfying activities, their work is relevant and they tend to view themselves positively.

Universitat de Barcelona. Institut de Ciències de l'Educació

Charles-L. Slater, *Educational Leadership in Mexico, Spain, and the United States…*

<References>

Antúnez, S. M. (2012). *Una brújula para la dirección escolar: Orientaciones para la mejora*. México: Somos Maestros.

Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. New York: Free Press.

Burns, J.M. (1978). *Leadership*. New York: Harper and Row.

Day, C., Leithwood, K., & Sammons, P. (2008). What we have learned, what we need to know more about. *School Leadership and Management*, 28(1), 83–96.

Daresh, J. (2007). Mentoring for beginning principals: Revisiting the past or preparing for the future? *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*, 20(4), 21-27.

Diez, E.J., Terrón, E., & Anguita, R. (2006). *La cultura de género en las organizaciones escolares: Motivaciones y obstáculos de acceso de la mujer a los puestos de dirección*. Madrid: Instituto de la Mujer / Barcelona: Octaedro.

Edmonds, R. (1979). Effective schools for the urban poor. *Educational Leadership*, 37, 15-24.

Hall, E.T. (1983). *The Dance of Life*. Garden City, NY: AnchorPress/Doubleday.

Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. (1997). Exploring the principal's contribution to school effectiveness. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 8(4), 1-35.

Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G.J., & Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Kouzes, J.M., & Posner, B.Z. (1995). *Leadership Practices Inventory*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Kouzes, J.M., & Posner, B.Z. (2012). *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations*, 5th Edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Leithwood, K., Harris, A., & Hopkins, D. (2008). Seven strong claims about successful school leadership. *School Leadership & Management*, 28(1), 27–42.

López-Gorosave, G., Slater, C., y García-Garduño, J.M. (2010). Prácticas de Dirección y Liderazgo en las Escuelas Primarias Públicas de México. Los Primeros Años en el Puesto. *REICE. Revista Iberoamericana sobre Calidad, Eficacia y Cambio en Educación*, 8(4), 32-49.

Marzano, R.J., Waters,T., & McNulty, B.A. (2005). *School leadership that works*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

McNeil, L. (2000). *Contradictions of school reform: Educational costs of standardized testing*. New York: Routledge.

Universitat de Barcelona. Institut de Ciències de l'Educació

Charles-L. Slater, *Educational Leadership in Mexico, Spain, and the United States…*

McSweeney, B. (2002). Hofstede's model of national cultural differences and their consequences: A triumph of faith – a failure of analysis. *Human Relations*, 55(1), 89–118.

Murillo, J. (2006). Una dirección escolar para el cambio: del liderazgo transformacional al liderazgo distribuido. *Revista Electrónica Iberoamericana sobre Calidad, Eficacia y Cambio en Educación* , 4 (4(e)).

Pont, B., Nusche, D., & Moorman, H. (2008). *Improving School Leadership, Volume 1: Policy and Practice*. Paris: OECD.

Pozner, P. (2000). *Competencias para la profesionalizacion de la gestion educativa*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: UNESCO-IIPE.Press.

Slater, C.L., Boone, M., Alvarez, I., Topete, C., Iturbe, E., Munoz, L., Base, M., Romer-Grimaldo, L., Korth, L., Andrews, J., & Bustamante, A. (2005). School Leadership Preparation in Mexico: Metacultural considerations. *Journal of School Leadership*, 15(2), 196-214.

Slater, C.L., Boone, M., Price, L., Martinez, D., Alvarez, I., Topete, C., & Olea, E. (2002). A cross-cultural investigation of leadership in the United States and Mexico. *School Leadership and Management*, 22, 197-209.

Slater, C.L., Boone, M., Nelson, S., De La Colina, M., Garcia, E., Grimaldo, L., Rico, G., Rodríguez, S., Sirios, D., Womack, D., Garcia, J.M., & Arriaga, R. (2007). El Escalafón y el Doble Turno: An International Perspective on School Director Preparation. *Journal for Educational Research and Policy Studies*, 6(2), 60-90.

Slater, C.L., Garcia, J.M., & Gorosave, G. (2008). Challenges of a Successful First-Year Principal in Mexico. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 46(6), 702-714.

Slater, C.L., McGhee, M., Nelson, S., & Meno, L. (2011). Lessons learned: The promise and possibility of educational accountability in the United States. In C.F. Webber, and J. Lupart, J. (Eds). *Leading student assessment: Trends and opportunities*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.

UNESCO. (2000). T*he Dakar Framework for Action: Meeting our collective agreements*. Paris: UNESCO.

Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive Schooling: U.S. Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.