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EDUCATION IN PRACTICE

Cultivating the Talent of Educators for Learning and Belonging

Molly McMahon¹ and Theresa Pileggi-Proud¹

Abstract: As schools endeavor to implement the recommendations of *Cultivating Talent: A National Study Examining Pathways to Increase the Presence of Hispanic Teachers and Leaders in Catholic Schools* (“*Cultivating Talent*”), this education in practice article presents research-informed recommendations that can be implemented immediately by Catholic schools in order to strengthen student-teacher relationships and create a positive school climate that increases all students’ learning and sense of belonging.

Keywords: culturally sustaining pedagogy, positive school climate, belonging, inclusion

The 2022 landmark report *Cultivating Talent* illuminates the need and opportunity to increase the representation of Hispanic educators in Catholic schools in the United States, noting that, while nearly 20% of Catholic school students are Hispanic, just nine percent of teachers and leaders in Catholic schools are Hispanic (Ospino & Wytenbach, 2022, p. 5). Focused on benefits to Catholic education as a whole, *Cultivating Talent* calls for the Catholic Church and Catholic schools to engage in systems-level changes necessary to attract and retain Hispanic educators. Although the study does not look specifically at student outcomes associated with diversification, positive academic and nonacademic impacts on students have been found, including increased academic scores in reading and mathematics and decreased rates of absenteeism and disciplinary

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suspensions (Egalite & Kisida, 2018; Lindsay & Hart, 2017). In addition, research shows that significant impact can be expected in the realms of social and emotional competencies essential to whole child education (Blazar, 2021; Graves et al., 2017; Pianta et al., 2002; Saft & Pianta, 2001).

In considering the benefits attributable to student-teacher demographic confluence, several research-based practices can be incorporated immediately to support learning and belonging for minority and nonminority students. First, schools can bolster student-teacher relationships by engaging in culturally sustaining educational practices. Second, schools can create a positive climate by investing in schoolwide, equitable social and emotional learning.

Student-Teacher Relationships through Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

A distinguishing feature of Catholic education has always been the call to minister to the whole child. With parents as the primary educators and operating in communion with parishes and faith leaders, Catholic schools commit to attending to each aspect of a child's development, including academic learning, social and emotional competencies, and spiritual growth (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012). The *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Education* cite explicitly that, to do so, "The Catholic school should pay especially close attention to the quality of interpersonal relations between teachers and students, ensuring that the student is seen as a person whose intellectual growth is harmonized with spiritual, religious, emotional, and social growth" (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012, p. 10). Research supports the importance of student-teacher relationships from early childhood through adolescence (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004; Pianta et al., 2002, p. 91; Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004).

Blazar (2021), who examined student-teacher demographic confluence on students of color, attributes positive outcomes to his findings that, "teachers of color are more likely than White teachers—often substantially so—to hold growth mindset beliefs that student intelligence is malleable rather than fixed, build interpersonal relationships with students and families, prepare for instruction and differentiate activities based on students' individual needs, and address student (mis)behavior in productive ways that do not lead to a negative classroom climate" (p. 29). Accordingly, as schools endeavor to implement the recommendations of *Cultivating Talent* by increasing representation of Hispanic educators in our Catholic schools, investment must be made to develop those traits in nonminority teachers as well.

Blazar (2021)'s exploration points to the possibility of teacher development to complement efforts to recruit and retain teachers of color. Grounded in the work of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), culturally relevant pedagogy is designed to impart in teachers the mindset shifts, critical self-reflection, and awareness of social contexts necessary to grow in relationship with nonminority students and their families (p. 478; see also Blazar, 2021, p. 7). As originally applied in the early 1990s, culturally relevant pedagogy called for teachers and researchers to consider the impact of

deficit thinking in relation to African American students. Bringing to light students' experience of forced assimilation coupled with bias-laden differences in expectations, [Ladson-Billings \(2014\)](#) proffered instead the prism of academic potential, linking "principles of learning with deep understanding of (and appreciation for) culture" (pp. 76–77). *Cultivating Talent* references similar barriers faced by Hispanic families in Catholic schools, including "negative perceptions about their bilingualism, biculturalism, migratory status (for those who are immigrant), and even the various ways in which they live out their Catholic identity" ([Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022, p. 11](#)). Extension of the principles of culturally relevant pedagogy guides teachers to shift to an asset view, one that highlights the "favorable linguistic, cognitive, education, and cultural assets Latino children bring to educational settings" ([García & Öztürk, 2019, p. i](#); *see also* [Gay, 2013, p. 50](#)). Tied directly to culturally relevant pedagogy are the mindset and practice constructs referenced by [Blazar \(2021\)](#)—specifically, the positive impact on student outcomes of teachers' beliefs that intelligence is "malleable versus fixed." In addition, relationships with students and families emerge from an appreciation for the unique value of the diversity of cultures at play in students' lives ([Gay, 2013](#)).

Over the past decade, scholars and practitioners have expanded culturally relevant pedagogy to address issues of equity and belonging. Identity, in particular, emerges as an important prism, challenging teachers to examine how their own identities inform and limit their view of students, including their assessment of student achievement and behavior. Simultaneously, attention is paid to student identity, with respect and appreciation for what they bring to the classroom from their families and cultures, coupled with intentionality around the creation of identity-safe and inclusive learning communities ([Gay, 2018](#)). Ways to engage critically with the cultural environments of schools continue to evolve, marking a shift from culturally responsive to culturally sustaining pedagogy ([Ladson-Billings, 2014](#)). In doing so, schools commit to practices designed "to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism" ([Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 1](#)).

Positive School Climate through Equitable Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning

For Catholic schools, the call to attend to the social and emotional well-being of students is grounded in their charge: "Catholic school education is rooted in the conviction that human beings have a transcendent destiny, and that education for the whole person must form the spiritual, intellectual, physical, psychological, social, moral, aesthetic and religious capacities of each child" ([Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012, citing](#) *The Catholic School*, p. 29). Leaders "shape the conditions for high-quality teaching" by cultivating a positive school climate that fosters belonging and relationship and includes a culture of collaboration and explicit teaching of social, emotional and cognitive skills ([Grissom et al., 2021](#)).

A positive school climate is one in which students' personal, cultural, and linguistic assets are affirmed. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL),

“SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (CASEL, 2022).

While SEL has not always included an equity lens, Catholic school leaders can use equitable SEL to support a whole child approach to the development of all students. As described by Stephanie Jones of the Harvard Easel Lab, the advancement of equitable SEL: “1) ensures safe and inclusive learning environments that are respectful and affirming of diverse identities; 2) recognizes and incorporates student cultural values, practices, and assets; 3) fosters positive identity development; 4) promotes student agency and voice; and 5) explicitly acknowledges issues of bias, power, and inequality and works to address them.” (Jones et al., 2021, p. 45).

Not only do direct social and emotional skills play a role in students’ identity, sense of belonging, and relationships at school, but they also impact their academic development: “Children’s executive function and social-emotional skills lay the foundation for their life experiences and outcomes. Their executive functioning skills will determine how well they study in school, problem solve in the workplace, and take care of their health. Their social and emotional skills will help them navigate friendships, love interests, networks, and conflict” (Franchino, 2022, para. 1).

Implications for Practice

Advancement of student-teacher relationships through culturally sustaining pedagogy and positive school climate through schoolwide SEL requires shifts in both mindsets and practice. Catholic schools can take seven immediate steps to bolster learning and belonging of minority and nonminority students alike, while simultaneously imparting the social, emotional, and academic skills necessary for success in school and in life.

1. Engage and Invest in Necessary Mindset Shifts

The start of any initiative in a school begins with the work of the adult culture. First, schools must invest in anti-bias training. All people have biases—unconscious and automatic stereotypes that impact reactions, behaviors, and ways of thinking. Cultural differences play a role in how teachers interpret communication, behavior, and even the standards they set for students. While educators need to understand and explore their own biases to mitigate these impacts on students of diverse backgrounds, school leaders must provide the opportunity and structure in which to do so (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2018).

Second, schools must examine teacher mindsets regarding learning. The simple belief that intelligence is malleable and not fixed can enable teachers to send the message to their students that engagement in their education can garner success. Growth mindset coupled with high expectations

for all students can translate to short-term and long-term gains, particularly for minority students (see Yeager & Walton, 2011; see also Gershenson et al., 2015).

2. Build Relationships

If knowing oneself and committing to growth are the first steps towards a healthy relationship, listening is next. Particularly for students with different life experiences than those of the teacher, opportunities to be heard set the stage for trust and engagement (Smyth, 2006). For students experiencing trauma, voice takes on added dimension, as the exercise of perspective-sharing establishes students as the experts of their own experiences (Biddle et al., 2022). Further, when educators reach out in ways that “communicate respect, [are] caring, and [are] valuing of students and families,” it enables them “to develop deep knowledge about their students, their talents and interests, their families, and their cultural contexts” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2021, p. x).

3. Consider Language

The next step in creating a community of belonging is considering the language used to communicate with students and their families. Recognizing that the default (in language as well as other identity markers) is often the majority culture, consider ways to be more inclusive by shifting, for example, from “parents” to “caretakers” to more accurately reflect students’ home context. Similarly, care should be taken to ensure that communications are accessible, including the availability of language translations. As highlighted in *Cultivating Talent*, “Catholic schools are uniquely positioned to foster multilingualism,” both within the classroom and as part of the broader community (Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022, p. 23). In addition, resources associated with the dominant culture, including reading materials and classroom images, should be expanded to reflect the multi-ethnic, multicultural makeup of our schools and communities. Hispanic children, in particular, have been shown to benefit from representation in classroom literature, citing positive connections to language, identity, themes, and traditions (Rodríguez, 2014).

4. Invest in Adult Professional Development in Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies

Coupled with foundational mindset shifts, schools must engage in practices designed to support learning and belonging. First, while moving towards a more diverse workforce, leaders must stress that culturally sustaining pedagogy supports teachers in developing relationships with all students and allowing each child to be known and loved through the affirmation of identity.

Teachers routinely differentiate to meet individual student needs; being attentive to culture is no exception. Specifically, because “children actively construct knowledge based on their experiences, relationships, and social contexts,” culturally sustaining pedagogy enables teachers to leverage information gathered through relationship-building to create the framework for student learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2021, p. vii; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). To prepare, teachers must

couple self-reflection with ongoing cultivation of sociocultural consciousness, recognizing that “people’s ways of thinking, behaving, and being are deeply influenced by such factors as race/ethnicity, social class, and language” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The effort will assist teachers in spanning sociocultural boundaries that separate them from their students in culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms. Further, tapping into the richness of student identity and experience advances culturally responsive and sustaining education by establishing a counterpoint to ongoing initiatives to perpetuate a “monocultural and monolingual society based on White, middle-class norms of language and cultural being” (Paris, 2012). Instead, in our context, “A Catholic school’s curriculum should . . . reflect the beautiful diversity of God’s creation” (Boyle & Morten, 2020, p. 50).

5. Invest in Adult Professional Development in Equity-Based Social and Emotional Learning

Culturally sustaining pedagogy and schoolwide, equity-based SEL inform and enhance one another (Warner & Browning, 2021). When teachers are taught to be aware of and manage their own emotions, they are more likely to foster positive relationships and less likely to use reactive discipline (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Further, research shows that SEL training for adults has a positive effect on outcomes for students, especially those of different backgrounds (Seider & Graves, 2020). Professional development supporting teachers in explicit SEL instruction, as well as how to weave the practices throughout the school day, is essential to a positive classroom and school climate.

SEL training and practices directly advance the values and dispositions central to Catholic education: “Our faith provides us with so many tools with which to transmit these values and dispositions, including Gospel stories, the sacraments, and Catholic Social Teaching to name a few. Catholic schools work hard to integrate these opportunities for learning about, practicing, and experiencing our faith, yet perhaps we sometimes miss the explicit nature of developing specific skills related to the dispositions we hope to see in our students” (Boyle & Morten, 2020, p. 37). Investment in social and emotional practices that explicitly develop students’ understanding of emotions, management of emotions, relationship skills, conflict resolution, and an appreciation of diversity allows for common language and expectations for how students interact with each other in the school setting, thereby fostering inclusion and belonging in our communities.

6. Invest in Adult Professional Development in Trauma-Sensitive Practices

For students who have experienced adversity and trauma, social and emotional learning practices alone may not be enough, but, when paired with training for staff on trauma sensitive practices, all students will be able to thrive: “Aligning equitable SEL with trauma-sensitive work is also necessary to ensure that all students benefit from comprehensive, integrated support. An equity-focused, trauma-informed approach to SEL acknowledges and addresses persistent environmental stressors such as racism, transphobia, homophobia, and classism, which continually impact marginalized youth” (Jones et al., 2021, p. 49). There are many social and emotional practices

that overlap or align with trauma sensitive practices, but few are designed to be intentionally trauma-informed, so this investment in further teacher training is necessary to support the healthy development of all students ([Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2018](#)).

7. Invest in Adult Professional Development in Restorative Discipline Practices

Students are most vulnerable to forms of inequity when they are struggling emotionally, socially, and behaviorally. To answer the call to minister to all students, Catholic Schools must look deeply at systems of discipline. Often, schools have punitive-only discipline practices that do not change behavior nor support students in gaining the skills to do better given the same situation the next time. Instead, schools must consider how philosophies around discipline align with the core values of Catholic education, as well as the impact on relationships. Schools must teach prosocial behaviors, coping skills, and management strategies through SEL and pair those with practices that uphold the dignity of students when they fail at these behaviors: “If SEL aims to promote the health, wellbeing, and learning potential of all children, it must acknowledge the systems and practices that cause harm to individuals in our communities. It is therefore mutually reinforcing to engage in complementary practices and structures that seek to dismantle systems of oppression and reduce harm alongside traditional SEL efforts. Restorative justice practices (RJP) in particular have been cited for their potential to address racial disparities perpetuated by inequitable school discipline” ([Jones et al., 2021, p. 49, citing Gonzalez, 2015](#)).

[Boyle and Morten \(2020\)](#) point to guidance from the [USCCB \(2003\)](#) regarding restorative justice practices in the criminal justice system, asserting important implications for how Catholic schools treat students: “Restorative justice is a powerful approach to discipline that focuses on repairing harm through interactive processes that engage all stakeholders. Implemented well, restorative justice shifts the focus of discipline from punishment to learning and from the individual to the community” (p. 43).

Conclusion

Complementary strategies and sustained dedication are essential to lasting and systematic change. While engaging in efforts to recruit and retain Hispanic educators and leaders, Catholic schools can simultaneously invest in the mindset shifts, ongoing development, and schoolwide practices necessary for student learning and belonging. Rich student-teacher relationships, grounded in culturally sustaining educational practices, must form the core of Catholic learning communities. This includes a consideration of representation and voice in classroom and school libraries, as well as inclusive communications and scheduling. Through schoolwide SEL and equity-forward behavioral supports, leaders can create the positive school climate necessary for all students to thrive. At every step, diverse perspectives, broad participation, and elevated student voice are necessary to create Catholic school communities rich with learning and belonging.

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