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Immigrant Catholic School Teachers: Working Across Cultures, Opportunities and Perspectives

Melodie Wyttenbach¹, Anne Marie Funk¹, and Marissa Browne¹

Abstract: While the majority of our Catholic schools in the United States today are far from their roots as schools run by immigrants for immigrants, the stories of immigrant teachers in our Catholic schools remain. With the majority of immigrants coming to the United States today from Mexico and Latin America, the Hispanic educators in our Catholic schools are highly diverse. A striking finding from the “*Cultivating Talent*” report is that nearly 40% of Hispanic teachers and 27% of Hispanic leaders in Catholic schools are immigrants, proceeding from nearly every Spanish-speaking nation, mirroring the backgrounds of students and families in their communities (Ospino and Wyttenbach, 2022). Their presence enriches the Catholic educational experience in the United States with important global perspectives. This paper aims to tell the counternarratives of immigrant teachers and shed light on the contributions they continue to bring to Catholic school communities and the challenges they face.

Keywords: Catholic schools, immigrant educators, Hispanic teachers, Hispanic leaders, Latinos, Hispanic ministry

From its very beginnings, immigrants and their descendants have shaped American Catholicism. European immigrants made notable contributions to the American Catholic experience in the 1800s and early 1900s, particularly as they formed small communities of parishes that sponsored schools for their children. During a time of pervasive xenophobia and Anti-Catholic sentiment, these Catholic schools responded by centering immigrant students’ languages and cultures, making the parochial school a social and intellectual center for newly arrived immigrant families (Bryk et al., 1993). Some ecclesial leaders, such as the immigrant bishop Saint John

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Neumann, prioritized Catholic education and strategically established connections with religious orders in countries of origin to help staff schools (Gowen & Mercedes, 1957). Thus, the Catholic schools in the United States were truly an immigrant enterprise envisioned by immigrant bishops, built by immigrant families, and staffed by immigrant teachers.

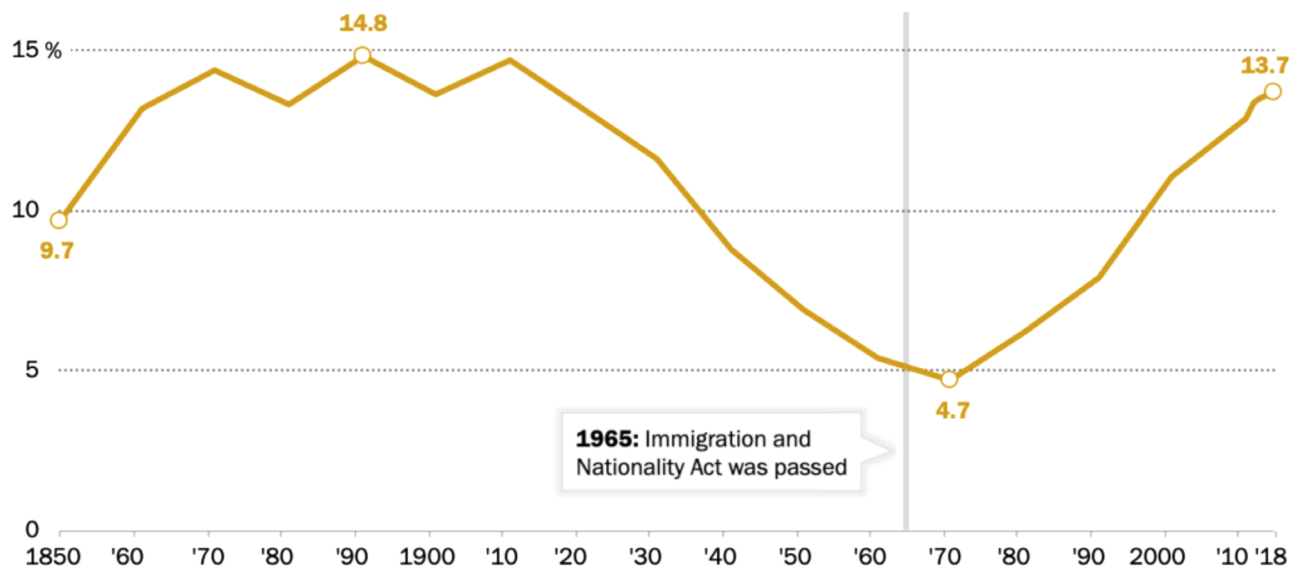
The history of the United States reveals episodic waves of immigration. The peak of the foreign-born population reached its peak in 1890, when 14.8% of the U.S. population consisted of immigrants (see Figure 1; Pew Research Center, 2020). The proliferation of Catholic schools quickly accompanied this 19th century surge, to the point that in 1900 there were an estimated 3,500 Catholic schools educating all age groups. That number nearly doubled by 1920, with more than 6,551 Catholic schools serving 1.7 million elementary-aged students alone (Walch, 2016). This explosive growth of Catholic schools continued well into the 20th century.

Figure 1

Immigrant Share of U.S. Population Nears Historic High

Immigrant share of U.S. population nears historic high

% of U.S. population that is foreign born



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850-2000" and Pew Research Center tabulations of 2010-2018 American Community Survey (IPUMS).

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Note. Source: [Pew Research Center \(2020\)](#).

Contrasting this growth with today, the foreign-born population of the United States currently stands at 13.7% of the population (44.8 million), with immigrant origins differing drastically from the 19th century surge (Budiman, 2020; Wang & Wu, 2021). According to the Pew Research Center, European and other North American immigrants made up only a small share of the foreign-born population (13%) in 2018, with Asians (28%), Mexicans (25%), and other Latin Americans (25%) each making up about a quarter of the U.S. immigrant population (2020). The immigrant population has more than quadrupled since the 1960s, and while the birthrate in the United States has decreased in recent years, the number of immigrants living in the United States is projected to almost double by 2065 (Pew Research Center, 2020).

Counterposed to the expansion of Catholic schools in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the number of Catholic schools has steadily declined since the 1960s. The 5.2 million students enrolled in nearly 13,000 U.S. Catholic schools in the 1960s have declined to just over 1.6 million students enrolled in just under 6,000 schools (McDonald & Schultz, 2021). While around 41.6% of the nearly 70 million Catholics in the United States identify as Hispanic, only about 2% of Hispanic children in the United States attend Catholic schools (Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022). The 2022 publication out of Boston College—*Cultivating Talent: A Summary Report of Findings from the National Study Examining Pathways to Increase the Presence of Hispanic Teachers and Leaders in Catholic Schools* (hereafter, *Cultivating Talent*)—gathered valuable data and insights into the experiences of Hispanic leaders and educators in contemporary Catholic schools in the United States. As with Boston College’s *Cultivating Talent* report, our research team made the decision to use the term “Hispanic” rather than “Latino,” “Latino/a,” “Latine,” or “Latinx” for this paper. While the use of the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” dates back to the 1970s and 1990s, respectively, the term “Latinx” is more recent. With more than 15 years of polling by the Pew Research Center, half of Americans who trace their roots to Spanish-speaking Latin America and Spain have “consistently said they have no preference for either Hispanic or Latino as a term to describe the group. And when one term is chosen over another, the term Hispanic has been preferred to Latino” (Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022, p. 6). Additionally, in a 2019 bilingual survey of self-identified Hispanic and/or Latino adults in the United States, only 23% had heard of the term “Latinx,” and only 3% use it (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020). Thus, in order to provide consistent language throughout, we chose the more widely used term “Hispanic” for our study and report.

Though many Catholic schools in the United States today are far from their roots as schools run by immigrants for immigrants, the stories of immigrant teachers in Catholic schools remain. The Hispanic educators in our Catholic schools are highly diverse. A striking finding from the *Cultivating Talent* report is that nearly 40% of Hispanic teachers and 27% of Hispanic leaders in Catholic schools are immigrants, whose roots are in nearly every Spanish-speaking nation, mirroring the backgrounds of students and families in their communities (Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022). Their presence enriches the Catholic educational experience in the United States with important global perspectives. This

paper aims to tell the counternarratives of immigrant teachers and shed light on the contributions they continue to bring to Catholic school communities and the challenges they face.

Immigrant Educators in the United States

The immigrant educator experience of today across public, charter, and private schools is dynamic and multifaceted. Of the estimated 8.1 million PK–postsecondary teachers across all sectors in the United States, approximately 857,200 are immigrant teachers, accounting for 11% of all teachers (Furuya et al., 2019). Nearly half of these immigrant educators teach at the postsecondary level. In addition to supplying a critical labor force and educating American children with a distinct international perspective, immigrant educators can also serve as cultural ambassadors for immigrant students who lack familiarity with American traditions, customs, and social norms (Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022). Closer analysis of the 857,200 foreign-born teachers reveals an overrepresentation in postsecondary teaching positions, where 22% are employed (Furuya et al., 2019). This statistic is indicative of an underrepresentation at the PK–12 level.

While 11% of preschool and kindergarten teachers are foreign-born, this percentage drops to 7% for Grades 1–12 (Furuya et al., 2019). For some immigrants, their immigration status or visa category may present a massive obstacle for working as a public school teacher in the United States at the elementary or secondary level. Even immigrants who have obtained citizenship status in the United States and hold advanced degrees may run into obstacles if they received their education outside of the United States. The process to have a foreign-issued degree recognized by accrediting bodies is complex and at times prohibitive. Therefore, fewer foreign-born educators may pursue the licensure or certification required for employment (Furuya et al., 2019). Recent immigration policy changes and the complexity of most states' teaching licensing processes have aggravated the teacher shortage in United States public schools. Thousands of teaching positions in the areas of bilingual education, foreign languages, mathematics, and science remain vacant every year in the United States—positions that well-qualified immigrant teachers could fill (Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022).

In addition to these professional challenges, immigrant educators face personal challenges when they come to the United States, such as acclimating to a new country, isolation, and racial and linguistic discrimination (Fee, 2020). Further, for immigrant educators employed in schools, it is not uncommon to experience hardships, such as difficulty in socialization and interaction with colleagues and administrators (Schmidt, 2010).

Considering the linguistic barriers in schools that immigrant teachers often face, teachers described the firsthand experience of their “linguistic abilities as liabilities” (Connally et al., 2017, p. 25). This phenomenon is exemplified by such experiences as that of a paraprofessional pursuing teacher credentialing who was told by a colleague, “there are other opportunities for people like you. You can't be a teacher in America with such a heavy accent” (Connally et al., 2017, p. 4).

Communication shapes the teaching profession, not only in the craft of teaching but also in building social capital with colleagues and families. Accented English, as well as different mannerisms from the dominant cultures, may be met with discrimination (Oloo, 2012). Smith's 2018 study of three Afro-Caribbean immigrant teacher educators underscored that even native English speakers, such as these three highly educated and qualified university-level educators, found that they were characterized as "non-native" speakers of English in the United States, and that they contended with discrimination on the basis of their accents: "I think from the time I open my mouth, people refuse to listen. I don't think they try to understand me The expectation for anyone not speaking the American accent is that you're not speaking English" (p. 270).

Researchers indicate that there are limited data regarding the experiences of the immigrant teacher (Arun, 2008, Cho, 2010, Lee, 2010 & Oloo, 2012). Most of the limited research that does exist focuses on immigrant teachers in countries other than the United States. There is a paucity of data regarding foreign-born teachers currently working in U.S. Catholic schools. A 2015 study of adult Catholics in the United States found that 27% were foreign-born and that the majority of these individuals were from countries in Latin or South America (Lipka, 2015). The 2017–2018 National Teacher and Principal Survey revealed that 85.9% of Catholic school teachers are White, 7.6% are Hispanic, 2.8% are Black, and 2.5% are Asian. No data were included regarding what percentage from each group may be foreign-born or as to their countries of origin. In the 2020–2021 academic year, 9% of faculty in Catholic PK–12 schools (including leaders and part-time faculty members) were Hispanic (McDonald & Schultz, 2021). As with the National Teacher and Principal Survey, the data provided did not indicate the percentage of Hispanic faculty members who were foreign-born.

This lack of data presents an opportunity and call to capture the cultural competencies, global wisdom, and expertise that foreign-born educators can bring to U.S. Catholic schools. Further, capturing immigrant educator counternarratives creates an opportunity to highlight their representation in the Catholic school system. Amplifying the voices of immigrant teachers in U.S. Catholic schools would expand and reshape the dominant narrative of who a teacher is. One area for growth identified in the *Cultivating Talent* report is to "highlight these contributions" of immigrant Catholic school educators, thus "extend[ing] the American history of centering the immigrant in our Catholic institutions, parishes, as well as schools" (Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022, p. 51). Attentiveness of the Catholic sector to educating, supporting, and providing development opportunities for immigrant educators can yield important fruits for Catholic schools.

Methodology

Data for the *Cultivating Talent: Hispanic Educators in Catholic Schools* report were gathered from a national survey, focus groups, and interviews. Data collection occurred from July to

November 2021 and all research activity and materials were approved by the Boston College Institutional Review Board. Participants in the study were Catholic school teachers and leaders who identify as Hispanic. The Qualtrics survey was disseminated through a database of Hispanic and non-Hispanic Catholic school leaders developed internally at Boston College's Roche Center for Catholic Education. The survey included one set of questions for all respondents and separate sets of additional questions for teachers, and a second set for school leaders. Participants were asked to indicate their role in their school and received the appropriate corresponding survey. They were also asked if they were foreign-born and subsequent questions followed from their chosen response.

For the present article, we draw from the *Cultivating Talent* report data, disaggregating teachers' and leaders' responses, separating those who identify as foreign-born from those who were born in the United States. The full sample size for this paper is 94 foreign-born participants. We then reviewed transcript data from the foreign-born Catholic school teachers and leaders who participated in one-on-one conversations and focus groups. Drawing from this rich data set, we contemplated the stories and insights of the immigrant educators and school leaders and utilized open coding to identify and analyze themes of foreign-born Catholic school educators.

For this thematic inductive analysis of the stories and insights of immigrant Catholic school teachers and leaders, we situated our analysis within a methodology of counternarratives. We followed Cho (2010) who wrote that “[c]ounter stories bring complexity and richness to the prevailing concept of who can be a teacher and are transformative in nature as they have the potential to disrupt common understandings of what the journey to becoming a teacher might involve” (p. 32). The counternarrative approach provides an opportunity to listen to and amplify the stories as shared by immigrant educators—and thereby to redirect or disrupt the dominant history and story of the United States educator, in order to invite us all into the reality of what is, and the possibilities of what may be (Cho, 2010; Mora, 2014; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). As one immigrant Catholic educator recounted in a focus group in our study, when an immigrant parent saw her in her role as a school leader and learned more of her story, she turned to her little daughter and said: “One day, you’re going to be like her. You’re not going to be washing clothes like me. You’re going to be like her.” The event was transformative, and the recording and recounting of this event in the words and voice of the immigrant educator herself is an example of the continuous transformative power of such counternarratives. For the purposes of this paper, we provide a summary of the findings from the 94 immigrant Catholic educators who participated in the study and provide an expansive counternarrative perspective from two participants.

Findings: The Immigrant Catholic Educator Experience

We have organized the findings into two sections. First, upon conducting an analysis of the *Cultivating Talent* survey data of Hispanic school educators in Catholic schools who self-identified

as foreign-born, we provide a profile of these immigrant educators. Secondly, upon reviewing transcripts from the focus groups and one-on-one interviews conducted, we provide counternarratives from Carolina and Maria—a Catholic school leader and teacher, respectively—who shared extensively their personal and professional experiences as immigrant Catholic school educators.

Profile of Immigrant Catholic School Educators

We begin with an analysis of the demographics to profile the immigrant Catholic school educator. Out of the 94 foreign-born educators in the survey, 97.9% are from countries/territories in Latin America. The most common countries of origin are Mexico (33.0%), Cuba (13.8%), Colombia and Peru (8.5% each), and Venezuela (7.4%). Many of the immigrant educators reside in states that have large Latin American immigrant and Hispanic populations: 24% live in Florida, 13.8% live in California, and 9.6% live in Texas. Most of the educators surveyed are full-time teachers (54.3%). Those who are not full-time teachers are split among principals (13%), assistant principals (4.3%), other professional staff (counselors, social workers, curriculum coordinators; 6.4%), and other roles. Out of the 22.3% of respondents who selected “Other” as their role, five respondents serve in roles that may be directly related to their immigrant background: Spanish teacher, Spanish immersion teacher, and roles associated with Hispanic enrollment and outreach. Nearly half of respondents (52.7%) indicated that they teach in a dual-language or foreign language immersion school, demonstrating that they are both filling a demand in multilingual schools and contributing their linguistic assets to these school environments.

Foreign-born teachers in the United States tend to be highly educated (Furuya, 2019). When examining their educational backgrounds, 95% have bachelor’s degrees, 54% master’s degrees, and 12% doctoral degrees. Many respondents (40.5%) received degrees (any level) from institutions outside of the United States. Half of the respondents have a teaching license (50.5%); however, only 54.3% are full-time teachers. Respondents on average have worked for 12 years in the Catholic school system, demonstrating a commitment to their community. These data indicate that the majority of immigrant Hispanic Catholic school educators come to their Catholic school communities well-educated and their dedication demonstrates a loyalty to serving the Catholic school community.

Hispanic Identity

When asked if being Hispanic influenced their decision to become a teacher, most immigrant educators said “no” (72.0%), though some said “yes” (28.0%). Despite the low number of “yes” responses, the survey indicates that Hispanic identity is important to many immigrant educators in a variety of ways. For example, the majority of immigrant educators consider themselves a *persona puente* in some way; these “bridge builders” most commonly build relationships with Hispanic teachers, students and families. The least common group with which they network is Church leaders.

Mentorship

Almost 70% of immigrant educators (69.2%) had Hispanic role models in their schools when they explored the profession. However, only 37.6% reported being mentored by someone of Hispanic descent who influenced their decision to go into education. This 30% difference might suggest a gap between the status of role models and mentors and/or the existence of Hispanic mentors outside of an educator's school of employment. One third of respondents who were assigned a mentor teacher at their school had a Hispanic mentor teacher. Almost every respondent identified at least one other Hispanic faculty member, staff member, or leader at their school. However, the number of respondents who purposefully sought out these individuals for mentorship and/or support was much lower. Two thirds (66.0%) of those with other Hispanic faculty have sought their mentorship; over half of those with Hispanic leaders have sought their mentorship (58.2%); and over half of those with other Hispanic staff have sought their mentorship, guidance, or support (55.3%).

Recruiting and Representation

Only 13.8% of immigrant educators said that they actively recruit teachers/leaders of Hispanic descent. Out of the seven school leaders whose schools have specific programs for teachers to move into leadership or administrative positions, only two actively recruit Hispanics for those programs. When asked about Hispanic representation on the school's board of directors, respondents were split. About one third said that there was Hispanic representation (34%), one third said that there was not (33.0%), and the final third said that they were unsure (33.0%). Respondents were similarly split when asked about Hispanic representation among parents in the parent-teacher organization (39.3% said "yes," 30.3% said "no", and 30.3% were "unsure").

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and Cultural Programming

When asked if their school has a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) director (or a similar position), only 17.6% of immigrant educators said "yes," while a larger number said that they were "unsure" (22.0%), and the majority said "no" (60.4%). Out of those educators who work at a school with a DEI director, half said that their DEI director is Hispanic; in addition, half said that their DEI director is Spanish speaking, while 37.5% said "no" and 12.5% were "unsure." Having a school committee for DEI was more common than having a DEI director; just 16 immigrant educators worked at schools with a DEI director, while 22 immigrant educators worked at schools with a DEI committee (made up of teachers or board members). On the individual level, the majority of immigrant teachers were involved with cultural diversity matters/programs at school; 38.9% were "somewhat involved" and 25.6% were "very involved." When it comes to DEI advocacy in school, equitable engagement of Hispanic students in classes and/or activities was the most common area of advocacy. Despite their concern for Hispanic student engagement, less than one third of respondents (22.7%) have received formal training in working with Hispanic children and families.

For those who considered leaving their school for another job, lack of diversity at their current school was a less common, but still significant factor. Lack of diversity among adults at the school was a push factor for 18.4% of educators who had considered leaving their school; and lack of diversity among students/families was a push factor for 5.3%. Even more so than diversity, salary seems to be key to retaining immigrant educators. Those who considered leaving their school cited salary and/or benefits as the top reason (79.0%).

The majority of immigrant educators said that the Catholic traditions at their schools reflected their cultural background “often” or “always” (62.3%). The most common expressions of Hispanic heritage at respondents’ schools included religious feasts (70.1%), Spanish Mass (57.1%), and bilingual materials sent home (57.1%). Outside of school, 40 educators said they attend Mass in Spanish, and a similar number (41) said they engage with advocacy for concerns of the Hispanic community.

These profile data provide an overview of who the immigrant educators are in our Catholic schools, what their educational backgrounds are, how they come to the vocation of Catholic education, and how they engage with their school community and broader communities. Recognizing that each educator has their own story to tell, we follow this profile section with two counternarratives that provide a deeper understanding of the immigrant Catholic educator experience.

The Power of Family: Immigrant Catholic Educators’ Counternarratives

Research indicates that one of the shaping forces and ensuing characteristics of the United States’ mainstream narrative is that of individualism, classically depicted as the lone hero or protagonist (Raef et al., 2000). Many immigrants from Central and South American countries, as well as those from numerous African and Asian countries, are anchored in a collectivist heritage. Individualism and collectivism are “complex and multifaceted value systems that reflect different historically constituted standards for the interplay between independence and interdependence” (Raef et al., 2000, p. 59). The counternarratives of immigrant educators often reveal the contrast and even the conflict between these systems. We propose that by studying such counternarratives, we may also enter into the dynamic growth that can exist in the space between individualism and collectivism, having notable implications for how Catholic schools recruit and retain immigrant educators and students.

“So I Have A Voice Now”: Carolina’s Counternarrative

Carolina (a Catholic school administrator) was born and educated in Ecuador, where she graduated from a university. After marrying her husband, who was a U.S. citizen, she moved to the United States and “had to start a whole new life.” As she was raised in a Catholic family and went to Catholic schools until entering university, she sent her daughter to a Catholic school in the United States. Carolina volunteered at her daughter’s school.

[T]hen I started working as a teacher assistant. Then I went back again to college and got my master's in education. And then I became a teacher. And then they gave me the early childhood director job, which I've been doing for all these years. (Carolina, Personal Interview, 2022)

In our interview with Carolina, she emphasized the importance of family, using the word “family” nine times in the context of her own story, of her work as a teacher and administrator, and as a Catholic church parishioner. “It is in the family and the community where Hispanic Catholics primarily develop our cultural and ecclesial identity, indeed a countercultural conviction in a society in which focus on the individual tends to prevail” (Ospino, 2010, p. 417). Carolina's counternarrative illuminated the theme of family as a countercultural conviction and as an indicator of the power of collectivism.

At the outset of the interview, Carolina was asked to share about her own journey to Catholic education, and the first sentence of her response anchored her narrative in family. Carolina shared: “I was born and raised in a Catholic family. So always, Catholicism was very important to us.” Note the communal “us” in the second sentence of her response, emphasizing yet again a collective value frame of mind. Later in the interview, as she spoke about becoming the first Hispanic administrator at her school, she said,

I had to do things on my own, and try to find out ways to communicate with the families, and really become an advocate for families . . . because of the challenges that they have with language, with people understanding culture, and families specifically sometimes, and more The school hadn't been so supportive in that way Emphasizing communication and advocating for families [as an administrator], the parents were really happy. The enrollment duplicated like in two years. Like, the school right now has no room for more students. And when we came here, it was about to close. So they [the family]—you see, they see results. And now we have a new principal. And it's been wonderful. It's good. I'm like, right now, it's like, I'm seen. I've been heard. So I have a voice now. So it's really good. (Carolina, Personal Interview, 2022)

The theme of family, of attentiveness to and advocacy for family, is interwoven here with the theme of linguistic and cultural challenges. The space of conflict between collectivism and individualism is gradually transformed into synergy and new possibilities. Carolina's advocacy for the families in her school resulted in a significant positive impact on the outcomes for students and on enrollment. In further describing the effects of her voice for her school community, she shared about planning activities for all families in the school community, of advocating for families, and of instructing parents so that they can effectively help their children.

This awareness of the linguistic and cultural challenges that immigrant families may face is not limited to the school community for Carolina, but flows into another aspect of her life that she also characterizes as family—her Catholic Church parish.

I can tell you about the parish that my school belongs to. They have been wonderful. And they work really hard to welcome Hispanic families. They started celebrating also the Mass in Spanish. And they always invite me to talk about the school, to talk about the programs we offer, to help the families to advocate for social needs that they may have, educational needs that they might have. And we do it in Spanish. And we have this little celebration after Mass. We have empanadas. We have coffee. We have nice music. And families really feel connected. (Carolina, Personal Interview, 2022)

A connected theme here is that of celebration. As an immigrant, moving from one cultural space to another cultural space, Carolina, with her parish community, creates a welcoming space of celebration through food, language, and dialogue.

Carolina helps to partner the school with the parish in community outreach for the greater neighborhood. She explained,

So we try to help out in our community. We are also partners with a community health center. We are continuously inviting people now through Zoom to have a conversation about nutrition, and health, and now COVID, and so many things. And we also do it in English, and Spanish, and Mandarin, because in the neighborhood is mostly Asian, Chinese. So we always address the language of the families we have in this area. (Carolina, Personal Interview, 2022)

The cultural competencies that Carolina brings with her as an immigrant educator help to shape a vibrant outreach to the diverse cultures found within her neighborhood.

Carolina's counternarrative reveals the interwoven themes of family, navigating linguistic and cultural challenges, and advocacy. Family is the paradigm for how she sees herself, the school, the Church, and the neighborhood. The continuity of awareness of and sensitivity for the linguistic and cultural challenges experienced by other immigrants seems to stem from her own lived experiences as an immigrant and as an immigrant educator (McDevitt, 2018). Having built a new life and established her voice, she uses her wisdom and voice for the benefit of others. Some of the most powerful advocates are those who have endured challenges and suffering themselves. The care and advocacy for diverse constituents in her school, Church, and neighborhood flow from her commitment to a broad sense of family.

Carolina's insights have implications for school enrollment and for student outcomes. We see in her story that the care for family and her promotion of the interconnectedness of school, parish, and neighborhood helped to transform a school which was about to close into a school that is now at maximum capacity. As many Catholic schools in the United States struggle with enrollment, what are the lessons to be learned from Carolina's paradigm of family and her cultural heritage of collectivism? Further, it is important to consider how advocacy and relationships with families are parlayed into strong outcomes for student achievement and flourishing at many other schools. As Carolina pointed out: "And then they get part of the success, because they see you. And they feel you're really close as family. And I think it's part of the enrollment that has done very well in the past few years" (Carolina, Personal Interview, 2022).

"So I Had to Train Myself": Maria's Counternarrative

The theme of the power of family and collectivism wove through Maria's counternarrative, as well. Maria grew up in the Dominican Republic (DR), where she attended public school until she transferred to a Catholic school in the DR in sixth grade. A scholarship made this possible for her. Maria said:

I found a totally different environment for myself. And I just started to thrive. And like, it was so awesome. Like, my family was so proud and happy. And just the community and family sense that I felt there was such a difference. (Maria, Personal Interview, 2022)

Maria's experience of thriving in the community and family-oriented environment of her Catholic school in the DR ultimately served as a catalyst for her work in the United States. Maria had never thought of working for a diocese but a connection at her parish encouraged her to apply for a role. Out of this social capital came an unexpected path: As Maria stepped into her new role with the diocese, she was tasked with increasing Hispanic enrollment in Catholic schools. Maria described thinking back to her transformative experiences of Catholic education in the DR:

I started to connect all of those memories and that reality to my job here . . . This is kind of like giving back to the same reality I was in and trying to get more Hispanic families into our schools—certainly a challenge with making sure that our principal stayed on budget, but at the same time, welcomed Hispanic families that needed financial aid a little bit much more than the regular families . . . We did increase from 9% to 18%. (Maria, Personal Interview, 2022)

When considering the support Maria was provided for her position, she explained that there was no training for her role, "so I had to train myself." She sought opportunities to develop her

social capital, to foster buy-in from school leaders regarding the importance of committing to increasing Hispanic enrollment in schools, as well as developing her skills for effectively “empower[ing] families.” The power of family was critical for Maria’s success in increasing Hispanic enrollment through engaging with Church, school, and community. As an illustrative example, to increase enrollment in one school, Maria said they began marketing at a Church community that was 35 or 40 minutes from the school. “And all of a sudden, a few families—we got 15 families from that town. And we got a bus for those families. And those families started going to that school. And then that school became like 90% Hispanic” (Maria, Personal Interview, 2022). The enrollment growth demonstrates how representation of Hispanic educators matters to families as they choose Catholic schools. Having someone like Maria and Carolina as immigrant educators—who have distinct backgrounds and experiences, yet are connected by a linguistic and cultural heritage—is sought after by Hispanic families.

The strengths that immigrant educators like Maria and Carolina bring to their school communities—or families—are also distinctive. Yet there is shared wisdom in their family-centered paradigm and collectivist heritage that challenges the status quo and provides new horizons for how Catholic school leaders and educators approach the classroom, marketing, enrollment management, advocacy, and community partnerships. Capturing the counternarratives of the immigrant educator population in our U.S. Catholic schools shows the rich tapestry of voices, talents, and gifts brought to our classrooms and communities.

Discussion and Implications

Continuing to understand the profile of the immigrant educator and capturing their counternarratives allows for a deeper understanding of the Catholic educator experience; doing so also recognizes the distinct perspectives these individuals bring to our communities as well as the strengths of a collectivist approach to the numerous facets of Catholic education. To continue to expand upon the immigrant Catholic educator experience, we provide the following six recommendations for further research and action:

First, highlight the contributions of foreign-born Catholic school educators in the United States through gathering and analyzing data, and by listening to their voices and recording their stories. In light of the rising number of Asian immigrants, and mindful of the rise of prejudice and hate-based crimes against Asians throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (Wang & Wu, 2021), we recommend an additional focus on immigrant Catholic school teachers from Asian countries.

Second, shaped by data and stories from immigrant teachers, forge the development of equitable human resources practices that facilitate the hiring, training, and retaining of immigrant teachers. Cognizant of the barriers that exist for many immigrant teachers, develop “structured and sustained induction programs” to help develop social capital. In this way, human resource

departments may “becom[e] a strategic partner concerned with adding value to the organization” (Oloo, 2012).

Third, develop a teacher pipeline program for foreign-born teachers to become faculty members of U.S. Catholic schools. As Ospino & Wyttenbach note (2022), one natural avenue for building such a pathway may be through ministry, at the parish and community levels, as well as via university campus ministry programs. “Strong participation in parish life and ministerial engagement should be seen as sources of nurturing the call to serve as educators in Catholic schools” (Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022, p. 28).

Fourth, establish a critical mentorship program in one’s diocese or across dioceses for immigrant Catholic educators. The critical mentorship design allows underrepresented teachers to recognize the racial, cultural, and social identities along with ways to leverage experiential knowledge. It has been found to be an affirmative model of support for underrepresented teachers (Gist, 2021). Given the value mentoring programs bring to new teachers and leaders, the development of such a mentoring program could lead to stronger recruitment, development, and retention of immigrant Catholic educators.

Fifth, develop and provide professional development to educational communities around developing cultural competencies, particularly around the principles of individualism and collectivism. This can foster a shared understanding among our Catholics regarding the beautiful mosaic of the universal Church, the strengths embedded in a family-oriented culture, and an appreciation for the wisdom found in a collectivist approach to our educational enterprise. While it is imperative to provide support to immigrant educators, it is likewise critically important to form all Catholic educators in a deeper understanding of the numerous barriers that immigrant educators—and students—face, so that all Catholic educators may be a part of the solution in breaking down said barriers.

Finally, the counternarratives shared in our paper amplify insights from immigrant educators, holding implications for how to evolve enrollment marketing and management. Through the paradigm of family and the sense of symbiotic relationships, the immigrant educators we interviewed had success in increasing Hispanic enrollment at the local and the diocesan level. Their creativity, their understanding of the familial and Church communities, and their own experiences navigating barriers for immigrants allowed them to be “bridge builders,” thus increasing enrollment and retaining families.

Conclusion

While the data for Catholic schools—and for immigrant teachers and leaders in Catholic schools—are not as robust as they were in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the stories of

immigrant Catholic educators hold immense importance in the mission of Catholic education. The Hispanic educators in our Catholic schools are highly diverse, and bring needed perspectives to our school communities. To understand the future of Catholic education in the United States, it is vital to understand who these educators are, the barriers that they face, and the benefits that come from fully welcoming them into a school community. Chief among these barriers are the teacher licensure processes in the United States; the salary that Catholic schools are able to offer; discrimination towards people who speak English with a non-American or non-European accent; cultural barriers that make communication with colleagues and administration difficult; paucity of data; and an American-centric cultural narrative of individualism.

What emerged in the counternarratives was a powerful picture of the importance of family and community, and how these values fuel the vocation of Hispanic educators in U.S. Catholic schools. The counternarratives our research explored found dynamic strengths in the intersection between individualism and collectivism. The presence of these immigrant educators enriches the Catholic educational experience in the United States with important global perspectives by leveraging the power of collectivism. It is of particular note that the cultural heritage and wisdom brought by both Maria and Carolina were catalysts for immense benefits for each of their schools, including strengthening community, increasing enrollment, and building strategic connections with the greater community. What is abundantly clear is that the future relevancy and sustainability of Catholic schools in the American educational landscape is deeply intertwined with both the Hispanic immigrant community and with Hispanic educators. Further research that continues to build counternarratives of immigrant teachers will break down barriers and shed light on their contributions so that U.S. Catholic schools can reap the benefits that these educators bring to the table, as well as fully live out their mission and better serve their communities.

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