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Antonio Felix

Loyola Marymount University

John Beltramo

Santa Clara University

Lisa Archuleta

Santa Clara University

Marie Rodrigues

Santa Clara University

Mariajose Gomez

Loyola Marymount University

See next page for additional authors

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Critical Transformation: A Conceptual Framework for Examining the Impact of UCCE Programs on Latinx Catholic School Teachers

Authors

Antonio Felix, John Beltramo, Lisa Archuleta, Marie Rodrigues, Mariajose Gomez, and Angel Yanes

Critical Transformation: A Conceptual Framework for Examining the Impact of UCCE Programs on Latinx Catholic School Teachers

*Antonio Felix¹, John L. Beltramo², Lisa Archuleta², Marie Rodrigues²,
Mariajose Gomez¹, and Angel Yanes¹*

Abstract: Our paper represents a conceptual framework designed to (a) help current stakeholders within the University Consortium of Catholic Education (UCCE) critically reflect on their respective programs' support of Latinx Catholic school teachers and (b) provide guidance for Catholic education researchers in their future inquiry into the UCCE model of teacher formation. Our conceptual framework centers on three principles derived from both critical theory and empirical research into the support of Latinx teachers: critical consciousness and praxis, dialogue, and partnership. We use these principles to raise issues and pose reflection questions that can help UCCE stakeholders and Catholic education researchers explore how UCCE programs can further transform their efforts in developing the next generation of Latinx Catholic school teachers.

Keywords: University Consortium for Catholic Education (UCCE), Latinx teacher education, teacher diversification, critical theory

The last four decades have seen a substantial increase in the number of Latinx students attending Catholic schools in the United States (Felix, 2022; Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022; Smith & Huber, 2022). As the largest racial or ethnic minority group in the nation, the Church and its schools have been committed to finding ways to attract, serve, and engage the growing Latinx population (Felix, 2022; Notre Dame Task Force, 2008).

¹ Loyola Marymount University

² Santa Clara University

Nonetheless, this demographic transformation, specifically, the increase of students of color attending Catholic schools, has not yet been matched by an equal increase of teachers of color, who currently account for only 17% of professional staff in Catholic schools; slightly less than 10% identify as Latinx (Smith & Huber, 2022). And the presence of Latinx teachers in Catholic school classrooms matters: Research suggests that Latinx teachers positively impact and significantly contribute to the academic, social, and emotional needs of students of color (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Carver-Thomas, 2018). Studies show that Latinx teachers often bring with them a deep understanding of the sociopolitical and cultural experiences of students of color, which allows such teachers to not only improve the academic outcomes of their students, but also to serve as trusted confidants, cultural brokers, and role models for students of color (Felix, 2022; Carver-Thomas, 2018; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Teachers of color further enhance the education of students of color by reducing the teacher shortage in hard-to-staff schools serving minoritized communities (Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

Despite the many affordances offered by Latinx teachers and other teachers of color, Ospino and Wyttenbach (2022) suggest that Catholic schools have struggled to attract and develop more Latinx teachers for several key reasons, particularly the geographical mismatch between the location of most Catholic schools (in the East and Midwest) and the settlement patterns of many Latinx communities (in the West and Southwest). Many Catholic schools have focused their limited resources on boosting enrollment to remain open instead of seeking ways to engage and empower stakeholders—particularly immigrant families—within their school and parish communities. Lastly, historical discrimination and prejudice targeting Latinx communities have, for many, alienated them from Catholic schools and parishes. In confronting these challenges, the question is raised as to how Catholic education might better attract, support, and sustain Latinx teachers in U.S. Catholic schools.

Research in the field of teacher education indicates that teachers of color are more likely than their white¹ counterparts to gain access to (and find support in) the profession of teaching through alternative credentialing programs. Rather than study teaching through years of undergraduate or graduate coursework followed by a half-year of volunteering as a student-teacher, members of alternative credentialing programs engage in shorter periods of preparation, make an early entry into the profession, and then access graduate coursework and other supports offered while they teach as full-time teachers of record. The University Consortium for Catholic Education (UCCE), for instance, represents a collection of alternative teacher formation programs hosted by Catholic universities in the U.S. and are designed specifically to recruit, prepare, and develop new Catholic school teachers (Notre Dame Task Force, 2008). In their study of Latinx Catholic school educators, Ospino and Wyttenbach (2022) propose that the alternative Catholic teacher formation programs found within the UCCE might provide one generative vehicle for attracting and supporting

1 We join critical scholars (Pasque et al., 2022) in lowercasing the racial category of white to acknowledge efforts that decenter whiteness as the focal point and norm in education.

more Latinx teachers within the field. However, limited empirical research has been conducted around the UCCE programs in recent years have yet to explore how this model of teacher formation has specifically impacted the recruitment and support of Latinx teachers in Catholic schools. Additionally, little guidance exists for how UCCE stakeholders—directors, members, alumni, community support personnel, course instructors, field supervisors, etc.—might critically reflect on the ways in which their programs currently support and/or challenge Latinx members, as well as the ways in which their programs might improve their formation of such teachers.

Toward this end, we present a theoretical framework based on empirical research into the preparation and support of Latinx teachers and grounded in the work of prominent scholars from traditions of critical and Latinx critical theory. Our work does not represent research of a field study in UCCE programs. Rather, we review recent scholarship and theory on the development of Latinx teachers in order to present a conceptual framing that can help: (a) UCCE stakeholders critically reflect on the current state of their respective program; and (b) researchers in Catholic education begin to identify key areas for future empirical study.

In the following sections, we discuss the model of teacher education promoted by UCCE programs, with a particular focus on its three pillars of teacher support. We next explore key concepts from critical and Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit), and review major findings from the literature on the recruitment and development of Latinx teachers. We then propose a theoretical framework of Critical Transformation, along with accompanying questions, that can spur future reflection and research into the work of UCCE programs toward supporting the next generation of Latinx Catholic school teachers.

Before delving into the theory and research that grounds this conceptual piece, we first feel compelled to share our own subjectivities, in light of how they shape our approach to this paper. The first and second authors are both former Catholic school educators and current UCCE program directors. The first author identifies as Latino while the second author identifies as a white cisgender male. The third and fourth authors are current UCCE teachers serving in urban Catholic schools, and they identify as Latinas. The fifth and sixth authors are recent graduates of a UCCE program and current Catholic school teachers; the fourth author identifies as Latina and the sixth identifies as Latino. The second author notwithstanding, our team drew on their identities as Latinx Catholic school educators and teacher educators to help select and apply the theories of teacher education that not only afforded the strongest analytical frame but also resonated deepest with our own lived experiences.

UCCE Model of Teacher Formation

The history of the UCCE is documented both on its website ([UCCE, n.d.](#)) and in three articles published by the *Journal of Catholic Education* ([Davies & Kennedy, 2009](#); [Notre Dame Task Force, 2008](#); [Smith, 2007](#)). These writings locate the origins of the UCCE in the early 1990s, when

Catholic schools—particularly those serving urban, low-income, and ethnoracially diverse parishes in the U.S.—experienced an acute shortage of teachers, due in large part to the decline of religious sisters, brothers, and priests (Smith & Huber, 2022). In response, the University of Notre Dame established the Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) as a service-through-teaching program designed to bring recent college graduates into K-12 Catholic schools as lay teachers (Notre Dame Task Force, 2008). Several years after its founding, ACE provided funding and other support to other Catholic universities across the country (e.g., University of Portland, Loyola University of Chicago, and Loyola Marymount University), which created similar service-through-teaching programs, and in 2005, these university-sponsored programs coalesced to form the UCCE.

While other post-graduate service organizations (e.g., the Jesuit Volunteer Corps) have supplied U.S. Catholic schools with volunteers for decades, the UCCE specifically sought to develop teacher preparation programs that would support Catholic education by recruiting and training faith-filled, energetic men and women to serve as teachers in Catholic schools across the nation. (UCCE, n.d.)

Thirteen university-sponsored teacher preparation programs currently comprise the UCCE. These programs are united not only in their common mission of supporting the next generation of Catholic school teachers, but also by a shared model of alternative teacher development, one that is unique across the teacher education landscape (Notre Dame Task Force, 2008). Originally pioneered by ACE, this model aims to prepare and nurture teachers holistically and is thus built upon three “pillars” of teacher support: spiritual development and faith formation; intentional Christian community; and professional teacher development (Davies & Kennedy, 2009).

Spiritual Development and Faith Formation

According to the UCCE website, UCCE teachers “commit to sharing and deepening their faith and spiritual lives” through participation in their particular program. Each program is led by the charism of its sponsoring university (UCCE, n.d.). For example, ACE and the University of Portland’s Pacific Alliance for Catholic Education are inspired by the spiritual traditions of the Congregation of Holy Cross, which founded their respective universities, while programs like Loyola of Chicago’s LU-CHOICE program and Loyola Marymount’s PLACE Corps are grounded in the Ignatian principles of their respective Jesuit institutions. At the same time, however, UCCE programs share common features within this pillar of spiritual development and faith formation: All UCCE teachers take part in multiple spiritual retreats, attend Masses and other sacraments together, sponsor weekly or monthly prayer services (often called “spirituality nights”) within their intentional communities, and regularly share informal moments of prayer with their students and community members (Davies & Kennedy, 2009). While more intricate events such as program retreats are generally organized and delivered by program directors, much of the practices within this pillar are planned and led by the teacher members themselves, using their program’s traditions

and their personal experiences of faith and spirituality as inspiration for each event (Smith, 2007). Davies and Kennedy (2009) suggest that the exercises of faith formation and spiritual development help UCCE members establish and/or strengthen their understanding of Catholic school teaching as a vocation—one imbued with transcendent meaning and inextricably connected to the evangelizing mission of the Catholic Church.

Intentional Christian Community

The second pillar of the UCCE model calls for teachers to live with one another in an intentional Christian community (Notre Dame Task Force, 2008). More than simply sharing a physical residence and contributing to common rent as housemates, UCCE teachers commit to growing in bonds of fellowship by supporting one another socially, emotionally, and spiritually (UCCE, n.d.). Toward this end, many UCCE programs ask teachers to gather with their fellow community members regularly to share meals, attend Mass, engage in spirituality nights, and/or accompany one another on social outings. Community living also affords organic opportunities for members to collaborate and collectively reflect on their teaching practices and classroom experiences (Davies & Kennedy, 2009). Additionally, programs like PLACE Corps pair current members with alumni, who act as community support mentors and connect them to wider networks of Catholic school teachers in their area. These practices of fellowship “encourage each teacher’s development” and allow communities to “become powerful centers of personal and community growth” (UCCE, n.d.).

Professional Teacher Preparation and Development

The last pillar of the UCCE model for teacher formation consists of the professional preparation and development that members receive in their service as teachers. Typically, sources of this development take several forms: Each spring, UCCE programs most typically match incoming members with a full-time teaching position at a Catholic elementary, middle, or high school, ideally led by a strong principal who welcomes and supports novice teachers (Smith, 2007). Through the act of teaching itself, UCCE members grow and develop in both their dispositions as Catholic school educators and their understanding of pedagogy (Notre Dame Task Force, 2008). Nearly all UCCE programs also pair each new teacher with a local mentor—most often a veteran teacher at the same school site—who provides pedagogical advice, socioemotional support, and guidance in learning the school’s culture and community (Davies & Kennedy, 2009). The Catholic universities and colleges sponsoring each program offer UCCE members formal teacher education coursework at little to no cost; this coursework most often leads to a master’s degree in teaching or education, along with initial licensure in teaching (Notre Dame Task Force, 2008).

Although UCCE programs do vary to some degree in how they carry out spiritual formation, intentional community, and professional teacher development (Davies & Kennedy, 2009), all make commitments to establish the necessary structures (e.g., find and manage housing, put on retreats,

hold graduate courses, etc.) to fully support these founding principles. And while Catholic universities and colleges still seek new ways to support Catholic education in the U.S., UCCE programs represent substantial university-school partnerships, as each program actively and continually collaborates with school and diocesan leaders and staff to support UCCE teachers in their practice of the three pillars (Smith, 2007). This unique model of teacher formation and the university-school partnerships it involves are at least partly responsible for the sustained impact of UCCE programs on Catholic education (Davies & Kennedy, 2009; Notre Dame Task Force, 2008; Smith, 2007). Collectively, they support hundreds of current Catholic school teachers each year across 26 U.S. dioceses and now count over three thousand alumni, the majority of whom remain in the field of education after their initial two-year commitment. The imprint of these partnerships on Catholic education has been noteworthy, as many UCCE graduates continue to serve in Catholic schools not only as teachers but also as principals, superintendents, university-based teacher educators, and even pastors (Notre Dame Task Force, 2008). Additionally, the limited scholarship on UCCE programs suggests that their alumni develop a keen sense of vocation as Catholic school educators, as well as an abiding faith in the role of Catholic schools as a key evangelizing branch of the Church (Davies & Kennedy, 2009).

With few exceptions (e.g., Beltramo et al., 2021; Jez et al., 2021), recent empirical research into the UCCE programs and their model of teacher formation are scant, and the literature is particularly silent around its impact on the recruiting and support of Latinx teachers in Catholic schools. However, we contend that scholarship within the traditions of critical theory, paired with research investigations into the development of Latinx teachers in publicly funded schools, offer an important springboard for UCCE stakeholders and other Catholic education scholars to begin their work in this crucial area, namely, by pointing them to key areas for reflection and future research. In this section, we highlight the principles of a critical and LatCrit approach to teacher learning and point out how they align with extant literature around the recruitment, development, and support of Latinx teachers.

Critical Perspective on Teacher Education

A critical perspective on Latinx teacher education (Freire, 1977; Souto-Manning, 2010), proposes that teachers and students seek transformation of self and society through the practice of humanizing, dialogical approaches to learning. One branch of this critical theory—LatCrit—explores how race and its intersections with gender and class mediate the experiences of Latinx communities across various dimensions of U.S. society (Lavadenz & Colón-Muñiz, 2018). Echoing previous scholars (e.g., Oldenski, 2013; Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022), we draw specifically from critical and LatCrit theories because, given the historical rise of Catholic schooling in the United States, this tradition of critical scholarship not only sheds light on the current ways that Catholic institutions can better serve Latinx teachers but also supports the Church's original vision of Catholic schools as spaces that resist

oppressive, deficit-oriented narratives towards marginalized communities, and transform Catholic education as a liberating space for the faithful to thrive.

Critical Consciousness, Praxis, and Transformation

For critical scholars, the purpose of teacher education is to bring about transformation by developing teachers' critical consciousness and helping them take reflective action (or praxis) in their work. [Souto-Manning \(2010\)](#) draws on Freire's scholarship to define critical consciousness as an ongoing awareness of and reflection on inequities within teaching and teacher education, particularly by examining issues of oppression in society and asking how those challenges might impact preschool through college level classrooms ([Darder, 2002](#); [del Carmen Salazar, 2013](#)). For example, teachers developing a critical consciousness learn to interrogate their curriculum, questioning what assumptions this content makes about groups in society, whom it serves and represents, and whom it ignores or marginalizes. In so doing, they grow in their awareness of how issues such as standardization, tracking, and monoculturalism might mediate students' experiences of learning inside their classrooms. Within this understanding of critical consciousness, LatCrit scholars call for specific attention to be given to how racism—along with attendant issues like colonialism, xenophobia, and linguicism—have marginalized Latinx teachers and students within U.S. educational institutions ([Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001](#)). From a LatCrit perspective, for example, teacher educators can grow in their critical consciousness by examining and challenging ways in which their programs remain “white spaces” that espouse, normalize, and perpetuate the dominant culture, language, and values of white and middle-class communities, while in turn devaluing, ignoring, and/or subtracting from the identities and cultures of Latinx teachers ([Lavadenz & Colón-Muñiz, 2018](#)).

Empirical scholarship underscores the importance of developing a critical consciousness, both for Latinx teachers and within the teacher education programs that recruit and support them. When afforded opportunities to critically examine intersections of teaching with race/ethnicity, and to interrogate policies that disadvantage Latinx students and other students of color (e.g., English-only instruction), teachers report greater agency, commitment to equity, and inspiration in their work ([Cervantes-Soon, 2018](#); [Morales, 2018](#)). Teacher education programs guided by commitments to critical consciousness and an awareness of how race and ethnicity mediate their work have adopted practices and policies shown to benefit teachers of color, such as offering scholarships and reduced tuition ([Garza, 2019](#)); assisting teachers with spring job placements ([Carver-Thomas, 2018](#)); developing faculty in their understanding of culturally relevant teaching and critical race theory ([Soltero López & López, 2020](#)); and centering the lived experiences and cultures of students from historically marginalized backgrounds within teacher education content and assignments ([Gillanders et al., 2020](#); [Morales, 2018](#)). However, research suggests where institutions take a colorblind approach and fail to examine the ways in which whiteness shapes their teacher education programs, teachers of color report low expectations for their performance in

the classroom; pressure to conform to white expectations of professionalism; and feeling unseen, underappreciated, and underprepared for the classroom (Gomez et al., 2008).

Using their critical consciousness, critical educators are encouraged to respond to inequities in education through reflective action, or praxis (Freire, 1993; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). For teachers in K-12 schools, a crucial dimension of praxis involves the enactment of culturally relevant and critical pedagogies—developing relationships with students and their families, learning about the cultural practices of surrounding communities, and engaging students in opportunities to apply new knowledge toward solving real-world challenges in their lives (del Carmen Salazar, 2013). By translating their critical consciousness into praxis through classroom practices like culturally relevant and critical pedagogies, teachers of color report not only greater success in stimulating student learning, but also find deeper meaning in their work as teachers (Jackson & Watson, 2021).

For critical scholars, the development of critical consciousness and engagement in praxis are aimed at transformation of one's self, conditions, and society more generally (Freire, 1977; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). For example, teacher educators might seek transformation by engaging in conversations with critical colleagues who can push them in their identities as allies of equity (Berry & Russel, 2014) and by collaborating with schools and districts to dismantle and find alternatives to policies that harm students of color (Garza, 2019). At each of these levels, transformation is pursued as an ongoing endeavor; no single change taken at one point in time can fully address racism and other forms of oppression exerting influence over the institutions of teaching and teacher education. Rather, continual efforts of critical praxis are needed to bring about foundational and lasting changes in such institutions (Freire, 1977; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

Dialogue through Identity, Spirituality, and Community

Critical scholars propose that transformation—and its attendant development of critical consciousness and praxis—is borne out of a process of dialogue, a deep engagement between an individual and the world (Freire, 1977; Darder, 2002). Such dialogue occurs when learners have opportunities to fully express their integrated selves within a community that supports a critical exchange of perspectives, experiences, ideas, and affect.

For Freire (1977), dialogue begins first by uncovering who one is through self-reflection, and a critical approach to teacher education calls for teachers to re-examine their own identities and the contextual knowledge they bring with them to the classroom. From this perspective, who teachers are, how they see themselves within the field, and what they know about their students and school setting substantially shape how they teach and interact with students (del Carmen Salazar, 2013). Studies suggest that Latinx teachers experience inclusion and integrity when teacher education programs encourage them to reflect on and recognize the value of their cultural identities (Cervantes-Soon, 2018; Ostorga et al., 2020). A critical approach to teacher education also

assumes that teachers—especially those who teach in their home communities—bring with them not only an understanding of teaching and learning, but also a deep and valuable contextual knowledge of their students, classrooms, and school communities (Felix, 2022; Freire, 1993).

Within the critical tradition, one's self-reflection and expression extend beyond race and ethnicity to include one's spirituality, and a critical approach to teacher education recognizes the importance of facilitating teachers' pursuit of spiritual fulfillment and development (Darder, 2002). Pushing back against Western and secular divisions of mind, body, and soul, critical theorists argue that developing as fully integrated human beings and teachers necessitates attention to not just their pedagogical dispositions and content knowledge, but their human desire for transcendence and meaning through vocation (Hooks, 2002). From a Catholic and critical perspective, the spiritual formation of teachers is essential if they are to serve their students as models of the Gospels, especially in ways that seek to transform secular, individualistic society (Freire & Hunter, 1984; Oldenski, 2013). Catholic and critical education scholars in particular have challenged Catholic schools and leaders to return to their roots by serving the spiritual needs of immigrant and marginalized communities today, especially those of Latinx teachers and students (Leopando, 2017; Oldenski, 2013).

Scholarship in pastoral ministries for Latinx Catholics has echoed this critical challenge (Ospino, 2018). Research points to a paucity of culturally relevant and sustaining religious services offered specifically for Latinx communities of faith in the United States (Miranda, 2007), and many Latinx young adults report feeling unconnected to or underserved by religious institutions associated with secular colleges and universities (Nuñez & Foubert, 2016). In response, Ospino (2016) calls for a "New Evangelization" of the Latinx community in the Catholic Church. This approach no longer assumes active and unquestioning participation in the Church, but instead issues a "call to mission"—one that intentionally inspires zeal among Latinx communities of faith, openly acknowledges their socioeconomic and ethnoracial struggles in the United States, and delivers a message of hope by actively accompanying and advocating for Latinx communities in those struggles. To bring about the changes required for this "New Evangelization" of Latinx communities, research suggests that the Church—as well as its schools and universities—must not only make space specifically for Latinx ministries, but just as importantly, invite the voices and leadership of Latinx families and youths in shaping them (Ospino, 2018). Such ministries must place special focus on facilitating an everyday spirituality that is accessible and relevant to Latinx communities, particularly through bilingual practices and outreach, and through family-oriented (rather than solely individual) faith formation opportunities (Miranda, 2007; Nuñez & Foubert, 2016; Ospino, 2016). For the specific development of Latinx teachers, Ospino and Wyttenbach (2022) recommend that Catholic schools continually strengthen the sense of vocation that Latinx teachers bring to their work, support their involvement in parish ministries, and leverage faith formation events such as retreats to support a sense of belonging and spiritual community among school staff.

For dialogue to occur, one's expression of self—ethnoracially, culturally, spiritually—must occur in an exchange of thoughts and experiences with others through a supportive community (del Carmen Salazar, 2013; Freire, 1993). Such communities inhere a sense of trust, faith, and hope among learners (Freire, 1977), who themselves are supported by genuine relations of care and loving presence (Darder, 2002; Freire, 1993). Research suggests that teacher education programs designed around cohorts facilitate peer relationships and fellowship that support teachers—especially Latinx teachers and other teachers of color—in navigating the nuances of graduate school and the challenges of learning to teach (Garza, 2019; Morales, 2018). Scholars also note that teachers of color benefit from access to wider social networks of educators—the types of career resources more traditionally made available to white teachers—via partnerships between universities and school districts that can help advance careers, particularly into leadership pathways (Jackson & Watson, 2021). Additionally, studies suggest that teacher education programs and school leaders who create spaces for teachers' voices and, specifically, invite the participation of teachers in policy decisions report increased retainment of their teachers of color (Jackson & Watson, 2021; Navarro et al., 2019).

Expanding Dialogue through Partnership

For critical theorists, recognizing that communities are interconnected with the world, and the pursuit of equity and justice by and within one community remains insufficient (Darder, 2002; Freire, 1993). Rather, as communities grow in their critical consciousness and praxis through dialogue and collective action, they are tasked with reaching out to and accompanying others in a process of shared pursuit of learning and justice. For teacher education, critical scholars call on teacher educators to be particularly mindful of the communities from whom teachers of color are recruited and the school communities with whom they are partnered in their practicum experiences (Lavadenz & Colón-Muñiz, 2018).

Empirical research supports the idea that as teacher education programs and school districts make more intentional efforts to connect with Latinx communities, their attention to *familismo* and how it mediates the schooling and professional decisions of Latinx teachers is crucial (Rocha, 2021). As a central cultural tenet of many Latinx communities, *familismo* consists of dispositions such as loyalty, solidarity, and reciprocity among family members, as well as practices such as assisting in childrearing, contributing to family finances, and living close or otherwise staying connected to family (Calzada et al., 2013; Marin & Marin, 1991). In particular, studies have shown that families play a crucial role in modeling, encouraging, and passing along practices of faith among Latinx adolescents and young adults (Miranda, 2007; Nuñez & Foubert, 2016). Calzada and colleagues (2013) also suggest that the value of interconnectedness within *familismo* means that individuals in Latinx families are often closely linked to extended relatives and even close friends of relatives. However, they also note that connections

to members outside these groups can be constrained when, for example, family responsibilities limit access to external communities or institutions. [Martinez \(2013\)](#) further highlights that *familismo* means collective, family-based decision-making processes, where the well-being of the family in general and individuals within the family are major factors in the choices family members make, especially around post-secondary education and careers. While studies have yet to fully explore *familismo's* specific influence on Latinx teachers specifically in the Catholic school sector, we surmise from the current literature that this crucial dimension of Latinx communities likely mediates their decisions to enter, as well as their experiences within, Catholic schools and Catholic teacher formation programs.

As teacher education programs and public-school districts continue to face shortages of teacher candidates, especially in schools serving minoritized students, many have embarked on community-based partnerships cataloged as “Grow-Your-Own” initiatives ([Morales, 2018](#); [Valenzuela, 2017](#)). These efforts seek to specifically connect with and facilitate the vocational discernment of students and alumni from minoritized serving secondary schools, in hopes of inspiring those individuals to become teachers and return to teach in those same neighborhoods ([Carver-Thomas, 2018](#)). While literature in this field is still developing, early signs indicate that “Grow-Your-Own” programs successfully invite teachers of color and second-career teachers into the teaching field by appealing to their familiarity with and commitment to their “home” communities ([Valenzuela, 2017](#)). Importantly, this scholarship suggests that if teacher education institutions are to attract Latinx teachers and others from minoritized communities, intentional efforts must be made to connect with youth in urban secondary schools and make teaching a visible career geared toward community justice ([Valenzuela, 2017](#)).

As teacher education programs and school districts pursue initiatives to recruit teachers of color, critical theorists remind the field that such partnerships still largely operate in systems that privilege whiteness to the detriment of educators of color ([Kohli & Solórzano, 2012](#)). For example, when teacher education programs recruit and prepare Latinx teacher candidates, only to provide student-teaching placements with cooperating teachers who harbor unexamined racist views or practices, such candidates often report experiencing microaggressions that hinder their professional learning, heighten anxieties, and cause them to question themselves and the profession ([Rodríguez-Mojica et al., 2020](#)). Scholars recommend that institutions tasked with teacher placements or hirings take pains to match teachers of color with cooperating teachers and school leaders who not only welcome ethnoracial diversity in faculty but actively seek and value it, understanding the experiences and perspectives of teachers of color as assets to classrooms and schools ([Jackson & Watson, 2021](#)). Research also highlights the importance of providing Latinx teachers specifically with critical mentors—veteran Latinx educators whose experiences and perspectives provide valuable guidance on how to navigate and challenge whiteness in the field of education ([Garza, 2019](#); [Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022](#)).

A Conceptual Framework of Critical Transformation

Holding to our anchor in theory and empirical research, we present a conceptual framework of *critical transformation* as a springboard for UCCE stakeholders and scholars to reflect on and research the ways in which the UCCE model supports and challenges Latinx teachers. We use the term critical transformation to underscore a principle of critical theory that any one change to a system would be insufficient to fully address the inequities that persist within it; instead, continual progress through dialogue and action advances the system toward justice. Likewise, we see the potential for UCCE programs to transform Latinx teacher formation, and to undergo transformation themselves toward this goal would necessitate ongoing, comprehensive, and critical reflection, research, and action. Through such a process of transformation, this important model of Catholic teacher formation can more equitably support all early-career Catholic school teachers, especially those from Latinx communities.

We ground this conceptual framework of critical transformation in principles derived from critical traditions of teacher education and empirical scholarship in the preparation and experiences of Latinx teachers: (a) critical consciousness and praxis, (b) dialogue, and (c) partnership. After describing our understanding of each principle, we pose a series of questions designed to facilitate UCCE stakeholders' critical reflection on their programs' support of Latinx teachers and to identify potential areas for Catholic education researchers to explore in future research on the support of early-career Latinx teachers in Catholic schools.

Critical Consciousness and Praxis

The theory and research reviewed above suggest that programs seeking to support Latinx teachers and other teachers of color should explore ways to build all teachers' critical consciousness, particularly around the issue of race and inequity. Within their pillar of professional teacher development, UCCE programs might consider how their teacher education coursework affords teachers spaces to interrogate ways that race (along with class and gender) has historically mediated the educational system and particularly hindered equitable learning opportunities for students of color (Ostorga et al., 2020). Additionally, UCCE programs might examine how race shapes the Church and practices of faith within the United States, offering opportunities for their members (during retreats, for example) to reflect on the inclusion of multicultural approaches to Catholic spirituality. Under the pillar of intentional community, UCCE programs might consider how their programs facilitate conversations around race among members of the same households, especially as programs make efforts to diversify their pool of candidates. As UCCE teachers develop a critical consciousness, UCCE programs might reflect on the ways that they create spaces for praxis, that is, for teachers to take reflective action toward building greater equity. Particularly within the pillar of teacher development, UCCE programs could explore

how coursework and field supervision explicitly teach and support the enactment of culturally relevant and critical pedagogies as ways to confront inequities in Catholic education (Gillanders et al., 2020; Morales, 2018).

As UCCE stakeholders and Catholic education researchers continue to explore how critical consciousness and praxis are supported in UCCE programs, they might consider the following questions. How do UCCE programs:

- Develop their members' understandings around race and racism in society, schooling, and the Church, and where can they continue to grow in their facilitation of this awareness?
- Help members learn about the educational inequities historically experienced by minoritized students (and teachers) in systems of U.S. schooling, and how can that coursework further improve in exploring this crucial topic?
- Support UCCE teachers in learning about and enact critical and culturally relevant pedagogies, and how can UCCE programs develop in areas where they are challenged to support those asset-based pedagogies?

Dialogue

As a means for spurring teachers' critical consciousness and praxis, we echo calls of critical theorists and empirical studies to recognize and enhance the dialogue occurring within UCCE programs, particularly through teacher self-reflection, integral self-expression, and full participation. Given a teacher's needs to grow through critical reflection (Freire, 1977; Souto-Manning, 2010), UCCE programs might examine how they create spaces for teachers to critically reflect on their ethnoracial identities and how those identities have mediated their experiences as preschool through college level students and now continue to mediate their work lives as teachers in Catholic schools (Ostorga et al., 2020). Within the pillar of faith formation, UCCE programs could consider how they encourage, facilitate, and normalize multicultural and multilingual expressions of Catholic spirituality and faith in practices such as spirituality nights, retreats, and shared Masses, so that Latinx teachers (and other teachers of minoritized communities) can feel welcome to share and replenish their full spiritual and cultural selves. When reflecting on the pillar of intentional community, UCCE programs might examine the structures, spaces, and opportunities that exist for members of the same household to openly discuss and learn about race, class, and gender, particularly as those issues of oppression mediate the regular interactions of roommates. Additionally, UCCE programs might explore how the voices of Latinx teachers and alumni are represented in program leadership and/or included in policy-making processes so that decisions that impact Latinx members are made *with* them.

To assist UCCE stakeholders and Catholic education scholars reflect on the different aspects of dialogue and its role in supporting Latinx UCCE teachers, we present the following critical questions. How do UCCE programs:

- Currently support teachers in critical self-reflection about their ethnoracial identities, and how can these programs continue to strengthen opportunities for teacher critical self-reflection?
- Structure the practices of their faith formation pillar so that Latinx teachers (and those of other minoritized communities) have opportunities to express and share their fullest spiritual and cultural selves? And how can such structures further normalize multilingual and multicultural expressions of faith?
- Create and support opportunities for members of the same intentional community to acknowledge and discuss issues of oppression (e.g., race) when they mediate daily communal experiences? How can UCCE programs provide more robust and supportive spaces for such critical conversations among members?
- Ensure representation and voice for Latinx members and alums within program leadership and decision-making, and where can these structures be strengthened toward greater inclusion?

Partnership

Finally, we interpret traditions of critical theory and current empirical research as inviting teacher education institutions such as UCCE programs to examine their support for Latinx teachers by attending to their external partnerships, particularly with those communities who employ, support, and provide bridges to Latinx teachers. LatCrit and empirical research suggest that K-12 schools and higher education are predominantly white spaces, where Latinx individuals report feeling underrepresented, ignored, silenced, and/or otherwise marginalized as not “normal” (Cervantes-Soon, 2018; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). As UCCE programs decide on teacher placements and provide field supervision, they might explore how they match Latinx teachers with principals who specifically honor and value teachers of color as assets in schools and how they partner Latinx teachers with critical mentors. UCCE programs might also further examine their recruitment practices, exploring how they reach out to and attract members from Hispanic-serving institutions, parishes in predominantly Latinx neighborhoods, and even alumni networks of Catholic secondary schools—like NativityMiguel Coalition (NMC) and Cristo Rey—who serve minoritized students could be ideal candidates for Grow-Your-Own pipelines of Catholic school teachers.

Also, because Latinx teachers are more likely to experience strong ties to and interdependence with extended family through *familismo*, UCCE programs might explore how they connect with families during the recruitment process, invite families to spirituality and community events

throughout their relative's two years in the program, and help Latinx members meet familial responsibilities even while such members balance commitments to living in intentional community. For example, UCCE programs might consider how to acknowledge and support *familismo* by creating opportunities for family members to visit communities and teachers' classrooms, inviting families to celebrations throughout the course of a program, and envisioning families as partners in the process of developing novice teachers. Also, given that, for many Latinx young adults, decisions about higher education and careers are communal, often made in dialogue with family (Garza, 2019), UCCE programs might consider how they involve families intentionally in the recruitment process by offering to speak with parents or extended family members and welcoming family members on program visits.

As stakeholders and researchers of UCCE programs consider how external partnerships support Latinx teachers within the UCCE, we present the following reflective questions. How do UCCE programs:

- Place Latinx teachers (and other teachers of color) in schools where their ethnoracial identities are valued and where they can receive critical mentorship? How can such placement processes be further strengthened toward these goals?
- Intentionally recruit Latinx teachers, and how can these recruitment efforts improve through strengthened relationships with communities specifically serving Latinx young adults?
- Invite and include the families of Latinx members in the recruitment process, faith formation practices, and intentional community events? How do UCCE programs support Latinx members in their commitments to both family and intentional community? And how can UCCE programs further improve within these areas?

Conclusion

As we raise these issues and questions around critical consciousness and praxis, dialogue, and partnership, we underscore our purpose is to provide a conceptual framework and not to offer any empirical evaluation of individual UCCE programs or their current model of teacher formation more broadly. We contend that the current research around supporting Latinx teachers paired with theory in critical and LatCrit traditions have offered us both a lens for UCCE stakeholders to apply in critical reflection on their programs, as well as a constellation of areas to address in future research on the UCCE model's impact upon Latinx Catholic school teachers. But what might efforts in critical reflection and future research entail?

In the process of writing this paper, we as the authors engaged in a series of conversations and written reflections—to look at what critical theory says, to talk about the three pillars from the experience of Latinx teachers, and to reimagine structures of our UCCE programs so that they

aligned more fully with our anchoring mission and values. These dialogues were challenging, uncomfortable at moments, and time-intensive, but they presented us with immeasurably valuable and reinvigorating possibilities of what transformative and critical Catholic teacher education could be. Our approach to this dialogue—alumni, current teachers, and directors analyzing our programs from a critical perspective and then returning to ongoing discussions about program initiatives—is just one of many avenues UCCE programs might take, but from our perspective, this work in critical reflection is urgently necessary for all programs, especially those espousing values of diversity, equity, and inclusion and seeking transformation within Catholic education.

We also argue that this work for critical transformation extends beyond practitioners and should also include and leverage the participation of researchers in Catholic education. Using the framework we have presented above, we imagine empirical studies, for example, that sample Latinx teachers and graduates from UCCE programs representing different regions of the United States and that use a variety of methods—surveys, focus groups, and individual interviews—to explore how the model aligns with, supports, and could improve in areas of critical consciousness and praxis, dialogue, and partnership. Researchers might also consider comparative case studies that examine and contrast the formation experiences of Latinx Catholic school teachers who completed traditional teacher education programs, on the one hand, with those who completed a UCCE program, on the other hand, to better understand any advantages afforded to holistic teacher formation, as well as areas for the UCCE model to learn from traditional approaches. Regardless of which research methods are pursued, we encourage future inquiry to closely involve Latinx researchers and participants in the design and enactment of studies so that their voices, experiences, and questions ground the scholarship in this crucial area of investigation.

From renewed efforts of critical reflection and intentional research—using our conceptual framework or others focusing on Latinx teacher formation—we believe that UCCE programs have an opportunity to play a crucial role in the support of transformation within the experience of Latinx Catholic school teachers. When UCCE programs support their teachers in striving for critical transformation, pedagogies may become more culturally engaging and sustaining, making equity more possible in their classrooms; spiritual practices of teachers may widen to include those of all Catholic communities, thereby aligning them more closely with Christ's call for spiritual communion; and honest and critical dialogue can strengthen the bonds of fellowship anchoring intentional Christian community. Such pursuit of critical transformation can hold tangible benefits for Latinx teachers and bring all stakeholders in UCCE programs toward greater proximity with justice and Christ.

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