The Journey from Welcoming to Belonging: Stories of a New Principal in a Latino Community

Corena Marasco
Santa Clara High School, cori.marasco@gmail.com

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The Journey from Welcoming to Belonging: Stories of a New Principal in a Latino Community

Corena Marasco
Santa Clara High School, Oxnard, CA

From Catholic education's inception in the United States, Catholic schools were established for the immigrant population and the leadership was successful at building enrollment with the high European immigrant populations. At this point in United States history, Catholic education is in need of innovative change, especially in regard to attracting the Latino community, the largest Catholic group, to Catholic schools. In this study, I detailed my own journey as a new, first time, first year, Catholic school principal in a 100% Latino environment, where I was welcomed by a Latino community, eventually leading me to a deep sense of belonging. This study emerges from my autoethnographic documentation of my experience, through the use of my blog and archival field notes, as well as three interviews with archdiocesan leaders. Each of these sources provided data that provided overarching thematic patterns that led to my conclusions of the study. Through the weaving of the past and present of my leadership journey, in combination with the cultural experience of the people that surrounded me during this study, culminated into a worthy story of the process of my emerging leadership in a Catholic school.

Keywords

Latino students, leadership, principals, community, identity, autoethnography

> *The church is holy not because everyone is welcome in it. The church is holy because everyone belongs. People don't want to feel they're worshipping in someone else's house; they want to belong.*
>
> —Timothy Matovina[1]

The history of Catholic elementary education in the United States dates back to 1603, with the establishment of the first school in present day St. Augustine, Florida. With increasing immigration from Europe to

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1   (U.S. Catholic, 2013)

America, Catholic schools provided an important refuge, where the immigrants' ethnic values, culture, language, and faith were respected and integrated as an important aspects of students' education (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). In fact, Caruso (2012) has noted in his work that the

> Catholic Church built the largest private school system in the world to serve these immigrants, and congregations of sisters provided the workforce to help these people find their way in their new homeland. Their commitment to staffing these schools subsidized a system that was denied financial assistance through public funding. (p. 14)

In response, the Catholic school system in the United States was built largely by religious congregations of sisters who for many years were the primary teaching force of parochial schools. The sisters undertook Catholic education, as part of their hard fought efforts against the discrimination of Catholic immigrants by Protestants. Hence, Catholic schools spread across the country because of the explicit Protestant ethos in the social life of public schools and general efforts by ethnic Catholic groups to preserve their cultural traditions (Youniss, 2000).

In a concerted effort to support the expansion of parochial education, in 1884, the Catholic U.S. bishops met in their annual meeting in Baltimore, also known as the Third Plenary Council, and made it mandatory for every parish to open a school for their parishioners. Despite this expansion, there is scant information on Catholic schools from the late 1800s until the mid-1950s, although anecdotal information confirms that new schools were built and enrollment increased (Youniss, 2000). However, "from the mid 1960s until now, the data indicate an almost 67% decline in Catholic school enrollment" (Defiore, 2011, p. 3). Although there are a variety of reasons for this decline in enrollment in Catholic education, McClellan (2000) has argued that the primary reasons are the influence of church hierarchy, attitudes of Catholic parents toward enrolling their children in parochial schools, and theological shifts due to Vatican II. Lawrence (2000), however, posits another reason for the decline in enrollment in Catholic education since 1965:

> Most of the post 1965 immigrant groups do not seek to establish their own national parishes or schools.…Mexicans, far and away the largest U.S. immigrant group, also have the lowest rate of Catholic school utilization.…The most striking conclusion is that income alone is a

poor predictor of the variation in the participation rates among Hispanic and Asian immigrants. Other factors, including the immigrants prior exposure to Catholic schools in their country of origin as well as obstacles or opportunities afforded by local school and local parish environments, seem just as important in shaping their school-choice preferences and decisions. (p. 197)

Declines in Catholic school enrollment are often contrasted with the 1950s, when "50 percent of the Catholic children in this country were in Catholic schools" (Matovina, 2013, p. 20). Moreover, in an interview in the *U.S. Catholic* (2013), Timothy Matovina indicated that only 3% of Latino children today attend Catholic schools. This is an important concern, in that Latinos today represent 35% of all practicing Catholic parishioners, 67% of whom are between the ages of 18-34 (Suhy, 2012). With Latino Catholics approaching the majority of Catholics in the United States, Matovina (2012) offers a definition of Latino Catholics that is also linked to their participation as a global language community.

Although 'Latino Catholics' may be a convenient term to distinguish those with ancestral or personal origins in the Spanish-speaking world from U.S. Catholics with ties to the majority culture or other ethnic and racial groups, the idea of generic Latino Catholic is no more useful than that of African, Asian, European, or Native American Catholic. Spanish is a primary language in twenty-two countries, all of which have native daughters and sons now residing in the United States, the fifth largest and most diverse Spanish-speaking nation in the world. (p. ix)

Catholic education is a place where all should be welcomed and find a place to belong (Marasco, 2015). This requires a willingness among those in Catholic education to reach out to Latino students and their families. Although the concept of community outreach is not something new within the Catholic Church, it has been a slower process within the Latino community. Parrott (2011) explains this phenomenon in the following way:

A growing number of the nation's Catholic schools have launched a quest to attract more Latinos, by far the fastest-growing ethnic group in the U.S. Catholic Church…Two factors are at play: First, in most

> Latin American countries there is no such thing as a parish school, so the entire concept is new to many Latino immigrants. . . . Also, Catholic schools in the United States have been slow to realize the differences between Latino immigrants and the descendants of Western European immigrants who founded the schools. (p. 14).

All this points to the importance of Catholic schools in Latino communities and the need to reach out to this population, as well as create environments that are genuinely welcoming, where consistent outreach to the community is integrated in the practice of parochial education, in such a way that makes students feel they truly belong. The discussion here moreover speaks to the heart of this autoethnographic study, where I entered as a new principal into a Catholic school within a poor Latino community in Los Angeles, which was very much a product of this history and the cultural tensions not yet fully engaged nor reconciled in the history of the school.

Autoethnography as Methodology

When choosing a research methodology for this study, autoethnography seem to fit best. The methodology, neither new nor outdated, provided a glimmer of hope in bringing humanistic eyes to the process of research. About this, Kitrina Douglas and David Carless (2013), have noted:

> Rather than appearing now for the first time, personal and subjective experience has instead been systematically removed from human and social science research over the course of the past century in response to calls for methods that more closely parallel research in the natural sciences. Thus, it is not by chance that "something is missing" from human and social science research texts of our times—this omission can be understood as a result of the dominant culture and political conditions of our times. This absence or gap can usefully be construed as a 'problem' for which autoethnography offers a solution. (p. 89)

By using autoethnography as my chosen strategy, it allowed me to consider more closely shifts within myself, while creating new ways for me to write about my experiences at the school within "a broader social context" (Hamilton et al., 2008, p. 22). As, Stacy Holman Jones (2005) explains that autoethnography entails "setting a scene, telling a story, weaving intricate connec-

tions among life and art, experience and theory, evocation and explanation…and then letting go, hoping for readers who will bring the same careful attention to your words in the context of their own lives" (p. 765).

From my own stories to the social context, which is situated in an urban Catholic school environment with a primarily Latino population, my research sought to better understand "the interaction of individuals not just with others, but with the culture of the society in which they live" (Merriam, 2002: 38). As an autoethnographic researcher, I served as a privileged active observer and participant, where I was actively engaged in a sort of "cultural dialogue" at Michael the Archangel School (MAS).[2] Bryant Keith Alexander (2013) explains this autoethnographic phenomenon a sort of "public pedagogy with several characteristics: It is designed to make public the often privatized, if not secularized, experience of others. … It makes present and visible the lived experiences of self and others—giving students, performers, and audiences access to knowledge that one hopes will open spaces of possibility" (p. 545). This opening of spaces of possibility served as my primary motivation, as I struggled to tell my story, move my inner thoughts and motivations from the safety of my own head into the unchartered waters of the public space.

Research Design

Significant to any autoethnographic study is the overall research design that informs the collection, coding, and analysis of the data that informs the final conclusions of the research. Key to the study were research questions that would assist and guide my efforts to better understand my personal and public experiences as a first time, first year triage (a term that will be further explained later) principal and the difficult process of evolving, with the community, from a sense of welcoming to a sense of belonging. The three central questions to this study included: (a) What challenges did I encounter? (b) How did I respond to those challenges? And (c) What did I learn from the experience?

Data Collection & Analysis

For this study, I used a variety of data sources that would provide for triangulation and serve my efforts to further strengthen the study. These data sources consisted of: my principal blog, The Adventures of a First Year Prin-

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2   School name is a pseudonym used to protect confidentiality.

cipal (Marasco, 2011); my archival field notes; and three interviews of archdiocesan leadership from the 2011-2012 school year. Each required a separate data collection procedure, resulting in overarching thematic patterns that led to observations based on my experiences as principal at MAS (Creswell, 2009, p. 63).

The data analysis for this study consisted of separating each data source, inductively coding the data, and looking for thematic patterns that emerged (Chang, 2008; Merriam, 2002). In order, I analyzed the interviews, the archival field notes, and then the archival blog. The primary method of analysis for the data sets was inductive coding that allowed me to identify overarching thematic patterns as prescribed on the writings of Chang (2008), and Miles and Huberman (1994). In analyzing the interview sets, I coded and labeled each individually, looking specifically for the stages in the process of moving from welcoming to belonging. I then sorted the data into groups for later analysis (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). I formulated the characteristics that emerged from the data into a matrix, and re-examined the characteristics that were listed.

There were four overarching categories that emerged as the matrix, where each category was linked to the characteristic most related to the category as evidenced in data (see Figure 1). The four categories and actions identified best described the movement from welcoming to belonging based on the triangulation of the data collected. The autoethnographic components of this study, moreover, were based on thematic patterns that emerged directly from the data (Chang, 2008). The structure of the autoethnographic components of this study was designed to respond to the research questions, in an organized, logical, and systematic manner. The responses emerged organically through an autoethnographic analysis of my story and became most specifically focused upon my encounters and interactions with three students at the school.

Category Title	Actions Related to Category
Welcoming	Meeting the community where they were
Acceptance by Others	Dealing with trauma and violence
Self-Esteem	Building respect
Belonging	Moving from surviving to thriving

Figure 1. Categories and characteristics identified as stages from welcoming to belonging.

Limitations to the Study

Although this study was carefully designed and grounded in the literature, there are two limitations. The first limitation is the potential bias, which is one of the inherent risks of using autoethnography as methodology. Holman et al. (2013) describes this limitation in the following manner:

> The autoethnographer is not a traditional participant-observer, some-one who infiltrates a cultural group and tries to become a part of the group (without going 'native') while simultaneously trying to write about the group, and then leaves to write, sometimes never again making contact with the cultural group members. Centering the work inside personal experience, autoethnographers not only have an invest-ment in the experience they study but can also articulate aspects of cultural life traditional research methods leave out or could not access. (p. 34)

The situations and experiences I conveyed through this study were personal and may be considered biased, but every experience in life is ultimately perceived through multiple lenses, including the subjective lens of one's lived history.

With the use of introspectively generated data, the second limitation was the generalizability of the study to other schools or principals. About this, it is important to note, "autoethnography does not claim to produce better or more reliable, generalizable and/or valid research than other methods, but instead provides another approach for studying cultural experience" (Holman et. al., 2013, 33). This study was not meant to be a "cookie-cutter" approach, but one that could be used as a point of reference by other school leaders and as an example of innovation, in creating an environment that moves from welcoming to belonging. The insights from a first year, first time principal may help others in similar settings to provide innovative change for their school environment, as well as to understand the importance of transformational leadership.

Context Matters

My leadership journey chronicles my work as a principal in a failing Catholic school that serves a Latino community, as well as my passion for serving urban youth and my willingness to examine my own experience in order to glean those lessons that might support others in similar contexts. From my earliest memories, I remember my grandma who raised me, sitting in her dark brown chair, with her dark gray hair perfectly coiffed and gentle smile, while I sat in my bear chair as she called it. She sat there in her special chair, one that I was sure was magical, as she told me story after story, transporting me each time to a different date, time, and world. She talked about our family, her own life, Gospel stories, fairy tales, and even stories that she would make up, as I begged her each time for one more story and one more lesson that I could learn. As a student of life, culture, and time, I believe every experience has a lesson to teach us. As I embarked on my journey as a first time principal at the age of 25, I kept this belief of learning from life's lessons clearly in mind.

What follows is an autoethnography of my first year as a Catholic school principal who grappled with innovation and change in a difficult school environment. Responding to this type of environment as an educational leader required qualities and characteristics similar to those of first responders in a medical emergency—a *triage principal,* as I have called it. The *triage principal* is one that enters and acts as the first responder, quickly assesses the immediate needs, finding solutions, and implementing strategies for school change, while involving the community actively in the process (Marasco, 2015, p. 4).

The work presented in this article is drawn from my earlier research: *The Triage Principal: An Autoethnographic Tale of Leadership in a Catholic Turn-around School* (Marasco, 2015). The research was focused on my leadership, shifting from past and present, just as my grandma taught me so long ago, and explored the intricate transition from welcoming to belonging, within a poor Latino community in East Los Angeles. This idea of transitioning from welcoming to belonging is best described by the opening quote of this article, where Matovina (2013), has stated, "the church is holy not because everyone is *welcome* in it. The church is holy because everyone *belongs*. People don't want to feel they're worshipping in someone else's house; they want to belong" (p. 22). The same can be said for the experience of Latino students within Catholic schools.

Michael the Archangel School

Reflecting back to those first days as principal at Michal the Archangel School (MAS), I remember my first day vividly. It was a warm July morning, with the sun barely beginning to show its rays. I was driving to work along the freeway with my palms sweating. I could not sleep the previous night, yet I felt the energy flowing through my body because that day was not just any other day; that day was my first day as a principal. Although my husband and I lived in Glendale, which was only 15 miles from the school, and I had watched him as a principal, I knew he and I would have vastly different experiences—we served two very different communities with very different needs.

In the heart of East Los Angeles, California, MAS is situated in a historically Latino neighborhood, where the majority of families live on modest incomes. An increasing number of families at MAS are immigrants, which is not unusual given that the area is still considered to be one of the largest Spanish-speaking communities in the country (Pew Hispanic Research Center, 2009). The school is a small, urban, Catholic, archdiocesan school that was founded in 1914. It was one of the largest built in the Southwest, as 1,000 students filled the halls of the school by 1944. From 1914 until the late 1980s, MAS was a double school, where each grade level had two classrooms of students and sisters staffed the school, as was the tradition. By 2010, there was only one sister who volunteered at MAS. The rest of the school staff were all laypersons.

With a significant drop in enrollment that occurred in the 2010-2011 school year, the traditional one teacher per grade model was no longer viable due to finances and the school was placed on the closure list, but remained

open. My experience of this situation was best detailed in my personal blog (Marasco, 2011):

> This is my first year as principal at [MAS] and my first year as principal overall. The school is in need of help, since there are only 35 students registered at the school. The Archdiocese was going to close the school, but Archbishop said 'No,' so here I am. The Archdiocese asked me to come up with an idea to work with the current numbers, so I developed a pseudo-non graded method, where there will be three full-time teachers, an aide/secretary, and myself. … Now, I just need to gather up donations from the local high schools and reconstruct the classrooms over summer.

Welcoming to Belonging: Our Story

Back to day one of my principalship, I was now one exit away as I realized it might actually be a relief to be in a 100% Latino environment, where I could learn the community's culture, praying that I would be accepted. I knew I had not only my age, ethnic background, language, zip code, and income level against me, but the fact that my husband and I did not have children, so to relate with the parents was yet another potential obstacle. Even with all of this, I exited the freeway with a sense of calm and confidence that I had what it took inside of me to lead the community that I was now called to serve.

I made a left down the street, passing the graffiti covered signs, old beat up cars parked on both sides of the road. I noted that there were two neighboring Catholic churches and schools. I stopped at a red light before my turn, and watched a family cross the street. The family consisted of a young mom, about 4 ½ feet tall, pushing an old stroller that wobbled with four other children following her in a line. The children ranged in ages of about 4 years old to 11 years old. The last one in line was a young boy, who was about 9 years old. He wore blue jeans that had a few holes in them, a grey and blue striped shirt, with his brown hair neatly combed. He stopped in front of my car, looked straight at me with his big brown eyes and gave me a huge grin, as he ran after his mom. At that moment, I knew in my heart that whatever would come my way, MAS would be fine, as I believed this was a sign from God.

As I finally made my way to the front door and fumbled through what felt like 100 keys, I opened the door and walked into what seemed to me

at the time as a school horror scene. The school was dirty, dark, and had no usable desks; the computer lab had six computers in it that were so old I did not even know how to turn them on. The only things that welcomed me were rats, mice, ants, and cockroaches! I was absolutely infuriated as I thought about my husband's school, which was in a middle-income area, with lots of resources completely lacking at MAS. The stark disparity lit a fire inside of me that still burns to this day, as I began my battle for resources that I felt deeply our students deserved.

Overall that first day, I felt welcomed into the community by the young boy with the large grin, yet the odds seemed to be against me, as I was inexperienced and new to the culture that I was called to serve. I was an outsider, but I knew I possessed the "un-coachables," my disposition and core values that would lead me on my leadership path and journey to belonging in the community. During my entire first year, I went to local parks, sporting events, community events, parties, and practically any event where I knew the community would be; I even did door-to-door visits because I wanted to meet the community where they were, introduce myself, and let them know that they were wanted and welcomed at MAS.

My Story with Christina: Coping with Trauma and Violence

Christina was a bright student, who possessed a maturity that was well beyond her years. She was one of our top students and was always calm and collected, which was one of the reasons I was concerned when she was sent to my office one day. She was absolutely hysterical as I walked her in and had her sit down. She covered her face and kept shouting out "why me"? Once I was able to calm her down, she told me about what was bothering her, as I sat there dumbfounded by her story. She had been in a car with her family—her aunt, uncle, and two cousins. Her uncle was driving the car and they were sitting at a red light, where she was in the middle of the backseat, with her cousins on each side of her. As they waited at the light, the uncle began arguing with the aunt, suspecting that she was cheating on him, so he pulled out a gun from under the seat and shot her in the head. He turned around and shot both of her cousins, and then turned the gun on himself. Christina had to actually crawl over her cousin's dead body in order to get out of the car. It was a scene that she could not forget and was one that haunted her most days and nights.

As I sat there listening to Christina's story, it took everything within me to not cry for what she had witnessed and the realization of the trauma that existed in some of our students' lives. The students would come to school each day, where we would have them for eight hours while they worked to their best ability in our setting, and then go home. I felt physically ill at the realization that we had them for only a small fraction of their lives and could not control, no matter how much I wanted to, what went on once they left our school gates.

From this encounter with Christina, I quickly realized that just like many inner city schools, our school had to be a place where the students felt safe and accepted—a place where they were sheltered from the trauma and violence that might surround them in their lives outside of school, even if we only had them for a few hours each day. To provide community support, we developed programs at MAS for "fun-days" that were culturally responsive and celebrated their backgrounds: 90% were Mexican and 10% were El Salvadorian. We also taught our students about other cultures that interested them. We tried to add as many programs as we could, so that the students would have a place to be after school, as we kept the school open until about 8pm every night.

My Story with David: Building Respect

David was a six-foot, two-inch transfer student from one of the local middle schools, where he received low-test scores and had developed a tendency of disrespecting others. He was admitted as an 8th grade student, since he had a younger sister who was also transferring. As with all transfer students, we gave him two weeks to acclimate to MAS. During much of the time, David was repeatedly loud, unruly and rude to others. Finally after the two weeks had passed and we had tried just about everything to support him in adjusting, I learned that he loved basketball. So as a last effort, I called him into my office where I challenged him to a basketball game. I told him that if he won, he could continue acting as he was and that he wouldn't get into trouble anymore. But I told him, if I won, he would have to respect his classmates, teachers, and most importantly himself. He accepted the challenge eagerly since I was smaller than he. We played the one-on-one game that Friday in front of the entire school, where I beat him twice, 10-to-0, and then 10-to-2.

From this encounter with David and other students who would transfer into MAS, I learned that MAS had to be not only a place where students felt safe and accepted, but they had to feel respected as well. My engaging David in a way that was meaningful to him prompted in his a sense that I respected him, while my challenge communicated that I expected to be respected as well. Learning from this experience, we devoted our time at the school to giving our students a voice and making sure that they had every-thing at MAS that they wanted and dreamt a school should have—just to name a few: getting lockers for all of our students, taking them on field trips to far away places, and building a basketball gymnasium for their practices and games. More important than the physical items, we worked to show the students respect, as we demanded respect in return. Each day was a new ad-venture, but my willingness to step outside a traditional approach to student discipline and play the basketball game with David was probably one of the most important decisions of my leadership journey at MAS—that basketball game taught me that by thinking outside the box and finding a way to enter a student's world, was the best way to forge a sense of community and mutual respect with the students, especially David.

My Story with Juan: Moving to Belonging

Juan was one of the most challenging students at MAS that I had en-countered. He came to our school wanting a better life, after he had been in a gang for three years. During that time, he had lost three full years of schooling and lost his best friend. A few weeks before he came to MAS, he was walking down the street with his best friend when a rival gang shot at them—both boys dropped to cover, yet Juan was the only one to get up. His best friend had died there in his arms, and he vowed that he would dedicate himself to a better life, since he was certain those bullets were for him.

We welcomed Juan into our community, accepted him, and quickly real-ized his academic skills were extremely low and his behavior in the classroom was a problem. We had some teachers who wanted him kicked out of the school. But I knew that if we did that, he would end up back on the streets and possibly dead—it was a possible solution that I refused to entertain. I knew that he was not my direct responsibility, but I kept remembering that he wanted a different life, a sentiment that he was able to articulate to me. The problem, however, was that he wasn't sure how to get that different life he yearned for or if it was possible. I felt like if we gave up on him then it was

proving everything that I disagreed with was right and we were showing him that his life didn't matter because he had made some wrong decisions.

After discussing Juan's situation with the staff, we decided to meet him where he was at and work to build his academic and social skills. He was placed in an individualized classroom, which was attached to my office, and we worked with him individually for months to help him catch up on the curriculum. He slowly worked his way back into the regular classroom and became one of our greatest ambassadors for the school. Juan is a student that I will never forget and is an example: if we meet students where they are, provide them with the right resources, and dedicate enough time to support them in belonging, all things are possible. He ended up graduating from MAS and now attends the local all boys' Catholic high school. From my encounter with Juan, I learned that once a student has "bought-in" to the school, feels a sense of ownership, knows he or she is significant to the program and truly belongs, even the most difficult a student can thrive socially and academically. Once students feel that MAS is where they belonged, the barriers of fear are removed and innovation truly occurs, as we continued to grow together as a community.

Implications for Practice

My journey as a first time, first year principal at MAS was filled with many challenges. At the time, I assessed and responded to each challenge as it presented itself, while I quickly moved onto the next challenge. Sometimes I made a decision that worked, and sometimes I did not, but I was determined to understand and embrace the new environment, where I felt I was called to lead and serve.

The school community and greater East Los Angeles community seemed weary, tired, and beaten; the community was distrustful, especially of new leaders, since the community was promised much over time with little success realized. The school community too seemed deflated and demoralized. Similar to individuals who experience trauma, when a community experiences significant trauma, it results in a lack of trust on all parts, which leaves everyone affected with a "wall" around them for protection from being hurt again. This was certainly the case at MAS, and the case of students such as Christina, David, and Juan. Nevertheless, it was precisely in the midst of what seemed like much chaos in the lives of these students, that I challenged to learn powerful lessons about being a response leader.

As an outsider, the more time I was in the community, the more connected I too became, as I moved from being an outsider to an insider. The community was at first hesitant to trust me, but after I followed through on my promises, I earned their trust as they began to see me as their school leader. MAS was viewed as no one's school when I entered, but by the end of that first year, it belonged to the community, as it went from barely surviving to thriving. However, this required that the students, their families, our teachers, and I risk doing something different. My experience at MAS taught me the importance of thinking outside of the box when working with families who are struggling to survive in million different ways. These important lessons reaped results in that the enrollment at MAS grew from 35 students to 116 students by the end of my first year as principal. The school was no longer on the closure list and moving forward as a place where students and parents from the Latino community felt both welcomed and belonged. This was evidenced in the next school year, when the enrollment almost doubled to 216 students. And in the final school year of my principalship at MAS, the enrollment had risen to 308 students.

Unfortunately, MAS is not a unique environment nor was I a unique triage leader. Yet, my story and the lessons I learned through this autoethnography were enormously significant to my development and future practice as a principal. I wanted to share with leaders who find themselves in similar situations, the importance of having the courage to welcome all into their school, so that they with the Latino community can take ownership and develop trust—valuing especially the potential contribution students to their development is essential for any leader. As both a first time principal and as a woman, challenges were nothing new to me. Yet, writing this autoethnography, I was presented with one of the most difficult challenges of my life—the art of honest reflection, and having the courage to share my thoughts and stories in a public arena, so that we can continue to learn together.

Recommendations for Leaders and Future Research

One of the most powerful lessons of this study is that context indeed matters, particularly when making recommendations for future research. The following three recommendations are grounded in my experience at MAS and my efforts to understand and accept diversity, and to place an emphasis on community collaboration, and reflective leadership.

Accept Diversity

My recommendation for Catholic school leaders, as well as Church leaders, is to fully work to understand and accept the diversity that surrounds them, so that our leadership in schools and within the community can be truly effective. Every community is different, and as we are called to lead within a new community, maybe one different from our own, the leader must take time to participate meaningfully within the community, in order to better understand their cultural traditions and to respect more fully their funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992). As a new principal in a new environment, my experiences as documented in my study helped to show that this is possible, as I worked to respect my students and they learned to respect me, even to the point of making me feel accepted and a part of their community as well. Within the Catholic Church, it is said that most types of diversity are accepted and respected, however further investigations need to be conducted that focuses on the Church's educational and mistrial work within the Latino community.

Emphasize Community Collaboration

My recommendation to leaders is to place emphasis on community collaboration, because context does matters. What this study has helped to show is that the most effective approach to school leadership is involving the community. Rarely do Catholic school principals work where they live, and even if this is the case, every community and every school is different (Owens & Valesky, 2011, 2015). There is not a "cookie cutter," or a "one-size-fits-all" approach to school leadership, as this research indicates, but the school leader must be willing to get to know and participate with community members, which requires time to listen, and the willingness to adjust one's approach when required in order to support a school to move from welcoming to belonging, especially within a Latino context.

Practice Reflective Leadership

Lastly, from conducting this autoethnography study, I highly recommend that greater emphasis be placed on the practice of reflective leadership in our work with students and their communities. The art of reflection is imperative for all principals, so that we can continue to learn from our experiences

and encounters, while openly and honestly critiquing our own actions within Catholic schools serving Latino communities. Reflective leadership, in conjunction with accepting diversity and placing an emphasis on community collaboration, constitutes one of the most effective approaches to our leadership efforts within Catholic schools—efforts that aim to genuinely cultivate an environment where Latino students and their parents are not only welcomed but come to feel that they fully belong, within the on-going life of the school.

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Corena Marasco is Principal at Santa Clara High School in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.