



2022

Fortalecer Raíces y Formar Alas: Empowerment, Advancement, and Retention of Latinx Educators and Leaders in Catholic Schools

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Recommended Citation

Lichon, K., Moreno, I., Villamizar, A. M., & Arana, K. (2022). Fortalecer raíces y formar alas: Empowerment, advancement, and retention of Latinx educators and leaders in Catholic schools. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 25(2), 44–64. 10.15365/joce.2502032022

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Cover Page Footnote

The University of Notre Dame's Catholic School Advantage team wishes to extend our deepest gratitude to the survey respondents, case study participants, and the design team, particularly April Garcia, Kevin Baxter, Manny Fernandez, Veronica Alonzo, Kathy Mears, Steve McClure, Clare Roach, Jenny Dees, Sarah Butch, Eliza Duarte de Gomez, and John Staud. The input generated was immensely helpful in starting the conversation around pathways toward strengthening and sustaining Latinx leadership and presence in Catholic schools across the country.

Fortalecer Raíces y Formar Alas: Empowerment, Advancement, and Retention of Latinx Educators and Leaders in Catholic Schools

Kathryn Lichon¹, Itzxul Moreno¹, Angela Maria Villamizar², and Kenna Arana¹

Abstract: While Latinx children are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. school population, the majority of Latinx Catholic school children may never be instructed or led by a Latinx teacher, principal, or administrator. This is a lamentable gap given that a shared student and teacher identity (i.e., home language, ethnicity, background knowledge, lived experiences) can lead to improved academic outcomes (Dixon, 2017) and non-academic outcomes (Carver-Thomas, 2018), that Latinx educators have conveyed a more profound sense of dedication and belonging when their identity is recognized and valued (Flores et al., 2018), and that there are persistent challenges in the retention of Latinx educators (Ocasio, 2019). To address these gaps, a year-long formation program was developed for Latinx educators and leaders in Catholic schools. Through surveys and interviews from participants in the first cohort, insights and evidence in this pilot study are shared in regard to the impact of the affinity group experience upon empowerment, advancement, and retention of Latinx leadership in Catholic education. Implications discuss how educator and leadership formation programs can support the needs of Latinx educators and leaders in Catholic education.

Keywords: Catholic leaders, Latinx educators, professional development

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As an aspiring Latina leader in Catholic schools, this program has given me the opportunity to *fortalecer raíces y formar alas* [strengthen roots and form wings] in my vocation. I feel more connected to my personal story and I feel more committed to lead and to empower Hispanic or Latinx students. I am super grateful for my mentor and cohort and for this year spent thinking and praying together and sharing stories and laughing . . . I was feeling burn[ed] out, but am excited about the possibilities of the year. I know I am needing to be here . . . Gracias y thank you. (Maria, Cohort 1 Participant).

Latinx¹ children are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. school population, but the majority of Latinx Catholic school children may never be instructed or led by a Latinx teacher, principal, or administrator. Given that a shared student and teacher identity (i.e., home language, ethnicity, background knowledge, lived experiences) can lead to improved academic outcomes (Dixon, 2017), as well as non-academic outcomes (Carver-Thomas, 2018), this paper outlines the need for professional development opportunities and formation experiences designed to support Latinx educators and leaders in Catholic schools.

In examining a year-long formation program developed for Latinx educators and leaders, feedback from surveys and interviews was analyzed to determine how members of an affinity group described growth and development. We hypothesized that participation in affinity-rooted professional development experience would lead to deepened networks, spiritual formation, and leadership skill development, promoting retention of leaders from underrepresented groups in Catholic schools. Particularly, we wanted to hear from participants where they were in their leadership journeys prior to participation in the LEAD program and how, if in any ways, their experience as part of the educator affinity group served as a change factor in their decision to pursue further leadership opportunities.

Given that Latinx educators have conveyed a more profound sense of dedication and belonging when their identity is recognized and valued (Flores et al., 2018) and that there are persistent challenges in the retention of Latinx educators (Ocasio, 2019), this paper provides insights and evidence of how an affinity group collectively supported the empowerment, advancement, and retention of Latinx leadership in Catholic education. Implications discuss how educator and

¹ A note on terminology: Our research team made the decision to use the inclusive term “Latinx” for the purpose of this study. When surveying the participants in the first cohort of the formation program, the preferred term was Latinx. On face value, the term “Latino/a/x” can mean a person who carries origin or descent in the lineage to a Latin American country. That said, we know that an individual’s understanding of that definition and identity is relative to their own socialization, lived experiences, and personal development. It is not fixed and can change over time. Through the formation program described here, we seek to unearth these notions of Latinidad as a way of combating a single narrative of what it means to identify and present as a Latinx person in the world and to amplify the voices of those leaders who desire to offer this part of their identity as a facet to their authentic leadership in Catholic schools.

leadership formation programs can support the needs of Latinx educators and leaders in Catholic education.

The Case for Catholic Latinx Educator and Leadership Formation

Latinxs in the United States are the fastest growing school-age population. Demographic trends estimate that at least one in three Americans will identify as Latinx in the next 30 years (Bordas, 2013). Currently, Latinxs account for 19% of the total U.S. population, the highest of any ethnic minority (Krogstad et al., 2022). Latinxs are also the youngest ethnic minority; almost six in 10 Latinx individuals are under 35 years old. One in three are under 18 years old (Patten, 2016), and more than one in five schoolchildren identify as Latinx (Bordas, 2013). Latinxs make up 27% of public-school students (Schaeffer, 2021). However, in Catholic schools, only 19% of students identify as Latinx (National Catholic Educational Association [NCEA], 2022).

The disproportionately small percentage of Latinx students in Catholic schools is even more stark because Latinxs make up the largest ethnic component of the U.S. Catholic Church where Latinx Catholics have contributed 71% of the growth of the Catholic Church in the U.S. since 1960 and represent more than 40% of all Catholics in America (Huckle, 2019). In 2019, 47% of Latinxs identified as Catholics (Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022). The relatively small Latinx student population compared to the proportion of Catholics who are Latinx presents a critical challenge for the Catholic Church, especially at a time when Catholic schools across the United States have lost over one million students since 2001 (NCEA, 2022).

The opportunity to more effectively empower Latinx families through Catholic education represents an exciting new chapter in the narrative of American Catholic schools. While Latinxs in the United States are the fastest growing school-age population, they face a persistent educational achievement gap in public schools (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). However, research suggests that Catholic schools educate Latinx and other underserved student populations especially well. Latinx students who attend Catholic schools are 42% more likely to graduate from high school and 2.5 times more likely to graduate from college than their public-school peers (Neal, 1997). More broadly, experts have found that schooling has disproportionately larger impacts on academic success for Latinx students as compared to middle-class white students, due to limited access to resources outside of school (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Thus, Catholic schools possess great power to propel Latinx students to achieve their highest potential.

The discussion of empowerment for Latinx families through Catholic education was elevated with the publication of the University of Notre Dame's Task Force on the Participation of Latino Children and Families in Catholic Schools' 2009 report, *To Nurture the Soul of a Nation: Latino Families, Catholic Schools, and Educational Opportunity*. The report outlined the significant impact Latinx enrollment in Catholic schools could have on both Catholic schools and the Latinx com-

munity. As a result of the report, the Catholic School Advantage initiative was developed at the University of Notre Dame to establish outreach and continuing education opportunities to help Church leadership, school administrators, educators and families understand the value and accessibility of a quality Catholic education, especially for students of Latinx descent.

While much fruit has been born from the vital efforts to increase Latinx student enrollment in Catholic schools, it was never the singular goal of the initiative. The growth of Latinx populations in Catholic schools has an impact far beyond enrollment. In our experience, immigrant and culturally and linguistically diverse communities provide an animating spirit that help Catholic schools reimagine their critical work in building the nation and Church of the future. While we cannot possibly know everything that the Latinx spirit can or will hold, nor do we want to generalize Latinidad into a single narrative, we can say with certainty that the Latinx community offers tremendous gifts to the Church and Catholic schools. In a recent article in *America Magazine*, [Cabrera \(2021\)](#) corroborated what the research team has witnessed firsthand: walking closely with the Latinx community, which values relationships, connections, and inclusion, greatly enriches parishes and schools. This convergence of substantial open seats in Catholic schools and favorable demographic potential is a providentially promising opportunity for Catholic education and, importantly, for the future American Catholic Church. We are called to educate Latinx and other immigrant children in ways that shape them to be our next generation of educators, theologians, business owners, and parents who pass on the faith to their children and bring life, relationships, and joy to our parishes and communities ([Lichon, 2021](#)). This is the great legacy and promise of Catholic schooling in America.

One of the key strategies identified in *To Nurture the Soul of a Nation* ([The Notre Dame Task Force, 2009](#)) was to improve the formation of Latinx educators and leaders, and the report called upon Catholic schools to build capacity and pathways to cultivate a new generation of teachers and leaders. This important call was echoed and amplified by Boston College's 2016 report, *Catholic Schools in an Increasingly Hispanic Church: A Summary Report of Findings from the National Survey of Catholic Schools Serving Hispanic Church* ([Ospino & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2016](#)), and 2022 study, *Cultivating Talent: National Study Examining Pathways to increase the Percentage of Hispanic Teachers and Leaders in Catholic Schools* ([Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022](#)). In their seminal national study, Ospino and Wyttenbach build upon the findings in [Ospino and Weitzel-O'Neill's \(2016\)](#) report on serving the Latinx church and contend that Latinx educators and leaders serve as role models for underrepresented students and torchbearers who carry hope for a bright future, as well as "instruments of communion amidst diversity" (p. 10) and "*gente puente* . . . architects of communion" (p. 36). The authors frame Latinx school leaders as agents of change and call for increasing pathways for the presence of Latinx educators and leaders in Catholic schools, as well as for the creation of support structures for Latinx educators and leaders.

The gap between the percentage of Latinx Catholic school teachers, leaders, and students and the percentage of white school teachers, leaders, and students illuminates the shifting demographics of the country and the need to improve the recruitment and retention of Latinx educators. According to [McDonald and Schultz \(2021\)](#), in the 2020-2021 school year, 9% (14,612) of part-time and full-time educators and leaders in Catholic schools were Hispanic. This is a lamentable gap, given that teachers of color can have a significant influence on their students, serving more purposes beyond their role as educators. A shared student and teacher identity (i.e., home language, ethnicity, background knowledge, lived experiences) can lead to improved academic outcomes ([Dixon, 2017](#)), as well as non-academic outcomes ([Carver-Thomas, 2018](#)). Teachers of color act as role models, typically holding higher expectations for their students, bridging home and school, and incorporating culture into the classroom ([Ocasio, 2019](#)). Additionally, “By exposing Latinx children to more leaders who look like them, it helps them imagine what they want to become and can reinforce strong self-efficacy around the value of their identities and Latinidad. It’s been said ‘you can’t be what you can’t see.’” ([Fernandez, 2018, para. 4](#)). Consequently, the presence of teachers and school leaders of color is imperative to providing a quality education to and improving the educational outcomes of Latinx students. As of 2019, only 21% of Latinx students were expected to go to college, 8% to graduate school, and less than 0.2% to doctoral programs ([Ocasio, 2019](#)). One theory suggests that Latinx student underperformance is linked to the underrepresentation of Latinx school leaders ([Crawford & Fuller, 2017](#)).

[Rodríguez et al. \(2016\)](#) note that the integration of community cultural wealth and social capital can dispel deficit thinking about Latinx students. Furthermore, [Flores et al. \(2018\)](#) argue that Latinx educators convey a more profound sense of dedication and belonging when their identity is recognized and valued. Both Latinx and non-Latinx educators must consider their own identities and beliefs in order to successfully serve their school communities and sustain asset-based perspectives of Latinx students. Thus, opportunities for educators to gather and consider their own identities, practices, and beliefs in a cultural context can provoke necessary reflection and cultivate the educator’s leadership skills, strengthening the current Latinx educational leadership landscape and shaping future generations of Latinx leaders through the development of a Latinx educator pipeline.

[Ospino and Wyttenbach \(2022\)](#) emphasize the need for such opportunities in Catholic education and the hopeful rewards they may reap.

Affirming their Hispanic and professional identities, grounded in a profound sense of mission, Hispanic leaders are instrumental in creating thriving school environments where Hispanic students, families, and educators feel at home. Hispanic teachers in the classroom exercise their calling to be *gente puente* by serving as mentors and increasing the possibility of achievement for underrepresented students. (p. 37)

Catholic Latinx Educator and Leadership Formation: A Framework

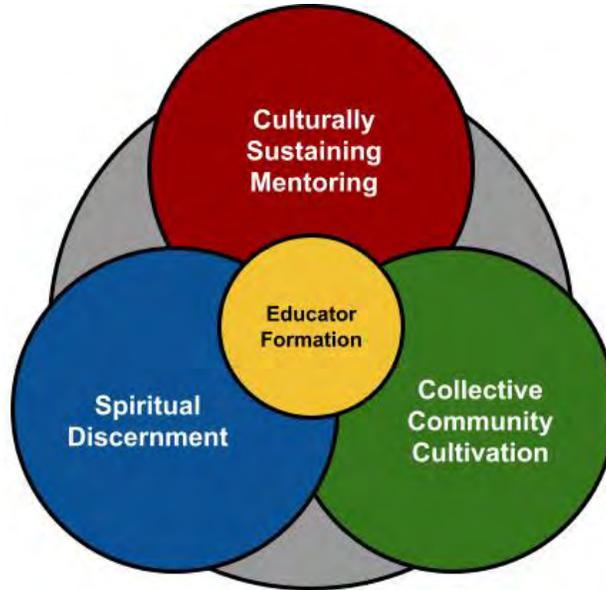
While a few studies have captured the experiences and beliefs of Latinx educators and administrators in Catholic schools, a dedicated “sacred space” (Pour-Khorshid, 2018) for these individuals to share common experiences, challenges, and opportunities has not been established. Answering this call, in the Fall of 2019, the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) and the University of Notre Dame’s Catholic School Advantage (CSA) team developed a framework for the Latino Educator and Administrator Development (LEAD) program. LEAD’s year-long professional development pathway is anchored in a cohort model bringing together self-identified Latinx educators and leaders in Catholic schools from across the country with varying degrees of subject area and grade-level expertise, as well as leadership experience. The first cohort included 16 LEAD fellows and three LEAD mentors. The second cohort grew to include 24 LEAD fellows, and the third cohort included 34 participants. Currently, there are six LEAD mentors supporting and executing the program design.

LEAD guides participants through intentional reflection on the pathways that led them to Catholic education, obstacles that can hinder their development as educators and leaders, and opportunities that engage their unique gifts and talents. Captured in Ospino and Wyttenbach’s (2022) theoretical framework on discernment, all Catholic educators engage in a continual process of vocational discernment, considering personal, professional, and contextual factors. In the case of Latinx educators in Catholic schools, cultural markers also influence the shaping of self-identity and discernment of one’s evolving role in the school. Ospino and Wyttenbach offer four different frameworks of discernment, divided into vocational discernment and relationships with the wider community. LEAD is an example of an initiative based on relationships with the wider community, “from community into the Catholic school” (Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022, p. 7).

The LEAD model was also designed with a reciprocal relationship in mind: from the participant out to the community. Ganz’s (2009) public narrative framework was utilized as a way to better understand how social change occurs and the factors that empower people to lead that change. The framework weaves the threads of three types of stories into a single narrative: story of self (a call to leadership), story of us (shared values and experiences), and story of now (strategy and action). The LEAD model incorporates these narratives through self-reflection, small learning communities, and participant-designed empowerment projects.

In addition to frameworks centered around community supports and outputs, the LEAD fellowship is based on a three-pronged approach rooted in educator formation theories and research: culturally sustaining mentoring, collective community cultivation, and spiritual discernment.

The first tenet, culturally sustaining mentoring, is fundamental to the LEAD program’s design. LEAD directly supports culturally sustaining mentoring by partnering LEAD fellows with Latinx leaders in Catholic education for monthly conversations around research, personal stories, and

Figure 1*Three Intersecting Tenets of the LEAD Program Design*

spiritual growth. Mentoring has been shown to be an effective support structure for personal and professional growth in educators through pedagogical, emotional, and psychological support (Gist et al., 2021). For teachers of color specifically, culturally sustaining mentoring—rooted in shared racial identities or affinity-based groupings—promotes even greater self-awareness, considers teachers’ community contexts, and values their experiential knowledge through an affirmative model of support (Pour-Khorshid, 2018).

Identity can be conceptualized as the sense of self one develops through interactions with others, experiences, and beliefs (Beijaard & Meijer, 2017). Particularly, as educators, we develop our own “teacher identity” that integrates both personal and professional identities. These identities are “influenced largely by sets of resources that are available” (Varghese, 2016, p. 43) and can be examined through the interaction between identities in practice and identities in discourse. Identities in practice are “created by a set of individual experiences and material resources . . . that changes and evolves” (Varghese, 2016, p. 46); thus, each individual’s identity in practice is a product of unique factors specific to their own personal history and background. Identities in discourse add another layer of complexity necessary to understanding how individuals’ beliefs are shaped. They do so by problematizing power structures and dominant ideologies and by contextualizing their impact on the development of teacher identities of minority educators. These concepts of identity deepen the interpretation of one’s “teacher identity” by adopting structural, racial, and social lenses to examine personal and professional experiences and beliefs. Hernandez et al. (2013) suggest that if leaders

reflect upon the influences on their teacher identity through these lenses, then they can better serve students of color and improve their educational conditions. However, despite research that corroborates this suggestion, structures of school leadership are often dominated by figures that do not adequately represent the diverse population of students and fail to incorporate this “necessary discourse on race and leader identity” (Rodríguez et al., 2016, p. 143). This further contributes to the underrepresentation of Latinx leaders in education, inhibits the potential for greater educational equity for students of color, and emphasizes the need for initiatives that develop all educational leaders, especially Latinx ones, to serve Latinx communities.

The case for the effectiveness of culturally sustaining mentoring is strong, but it is even stronger when considering a uniquely Catholic approach to this mentorship, rooted in Jesus’ model of ministry (Dobrotka, 2021). English (1999) describes mentoring as “an intense, life-affirming way of promoting the human and spiritual life. It promotes the interpersonal ideals of Catholic-school teaching as a profession in which care is extended to others, reciprocal relationships are established, and an ethic of care is paramount” (p. 407). The mentorship of Catholic educators acts as a source of development, self-direction, collaboration, continuous learning, and spiritual growth that then allows those educators to enrich and promote the mission of the Catholic school. Ospino and Wyttenbach (2022) found that Latinx Catholic school educators desired a supportive space to connect with other Latino educators. However, despite research that conveys how these spaces can enhance personal and professional development that advances the mission of Catholic schools, most Catholic dioceses have not adopted formalized mentoring programs. Structured mentorship for Latinx educators in Catholic schools is even more limited. As a result, educators in the study independently sought out external opportunities to interact with other Latinx educators through philanthropic fellowships, local Latinx professional associations, or conferences that typically attract public and charter school teachers. These spaces promote professional and social enrichment through profound identity exploration but lack a spiritual component, which is central to the nature of Catholic education.

The second pillar of LEAD’s formation is in cultivating a collective community and this tenet draws upon the reservoirs of cultural community wealth (Yosso, 2005) and funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005). LEAD intentionally forms a collective community through a cohort model, an in-person retreat, and a conclusion symposium. Opportunities for connection with other educators create spaces to develop collaborative and community-based relationships, confront challenges with those in the same profession, and connect different social networks, all resulting in growth of social capital (Lin, 1999). LEAD participants are formed in a broader network of educators and leaders from a wide variety of school settings, (arch)diocese, and regions of the country. Ospino and Wyttenbach (2022) pointed to the need for networking, particularly with the Hispanic ministry sector, as a place for growth in this field.

The third essential component of LEAD is spiritual discernment. Service to Catholic education is a vocation, and the LEAD programs work to honor the trajectory that brought the LEAD

fellows to this vocation, what currently inspires and challenges them in this vocation, and what this particular vocation is calling them to next. The scope and sequence of spiritual formation within the program takes on three inputs. First, leadership development is linked to the intentional formation of theological and cardinal virtues: faith, hope, charity, prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice. Second, vocation and calling are intentionally examined through an Ignatian discernment framework (Manney, 2015), and third, the call to Catholic-specific leadership is examined (Habiger Institute for Catholic Leadership, 2021). When woven together – culturally sustaining mentoring, collective community cultivation, and spiritual discernment – a beautiful tapestry can be created that speaks to the impact of this experience upon participants.

What I really got out of this experience is knowing that we're not alone. Even though within our schools we might be the only Latinx teacher, there are individuals in other schools going through the exact same experience and mentors willing to help us. Coming together as a part of this cohort has been amazing and [it has] strengthened my faith. It's given me the opportunity to build connections with other Latinx educators who have had a similar experience, and it has given me the courage to go back to my school and say, "This is what our school needs. This is what our Latino/a student population needs. So how can we elevate their voice as we go forward?" I am committed. (Sofia, Cohort 1 Participant B)

Catholic Latinx Educator and Leadership Formation: A Model

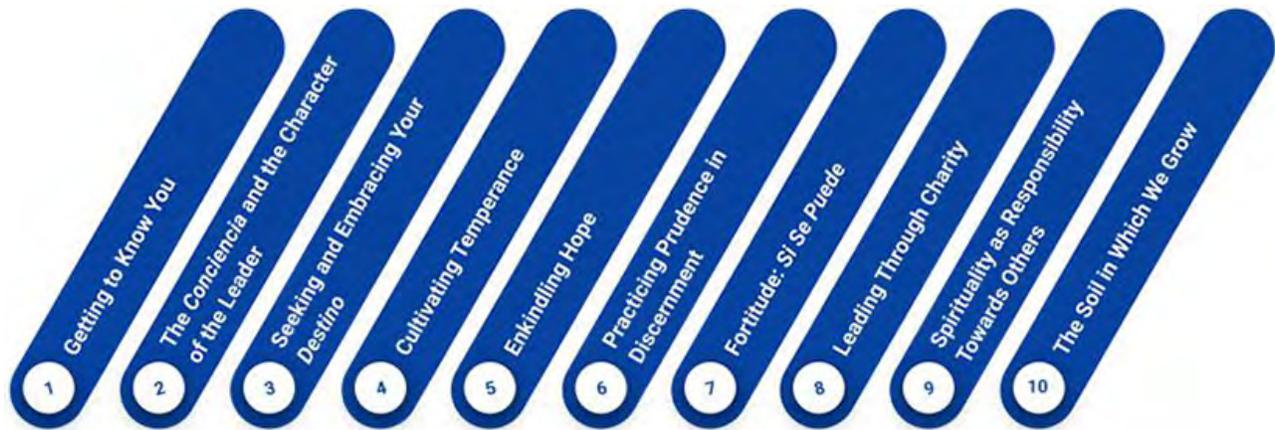
LEAD aims to shape transformative Latinx educators and leaders in Catholic schools through the following framework: embracing the LEAD fellows' personal leadership story and trajectory, educating and forming leadership qualities rooted in the cardinal virtues with a unique focus on Latinx culture and gifts, and empowering the LEAD fellows to recognize and act upon a need in their school community. The LEAD program has been developed as a year-long fellowship and leadership formation program, where the structure is centered around four key movements over the course of a year: virtual orientation in the summer, year-long monthly calls, winter retreat, and conclusion symposium.

Woven throughout the LEAD experience are social, spiritual, and professional development events and opportunities. To begin, program participants start with a virtual orientation in July and then engage in a small learning community led by an expert Latinx leader in the field (i.e., superintendents, principals, diocesan leaders). Once a month, LEAD fellows meet virtually in small groups of 4 or 5 participants from different dioceses and are guided through a conversation by their mentor. The meetings center around discussion of a monthly module that is based on a particular Catholic virtue and culturally relevant leadership topic and are designed to encourage personal and group reflection. The monthly calls address topics such as seeking and embracing one's *destino*, forming the *conciencia* and character of a leader, cultivating a *si se puede* mentality and

fortitude, fostering social action, leading with charity, and discerning one's path (Figure 2: Module Content Overview). The monthly modules include a variety of resources: prayer, readings, reflection questions, and supplemental articles or videos, and the themes and content for the modules are curated from a variety of sources such as *The Power of Latino Leadership: Culture, Inclusion, and Contribution* (Bordas, 2013) and *True Leadership* (Habiger Institute for Catholic Leadership, 2021), as well research articles in the field of education. The modules provide LEAD fellows with a basis for exploring the intersectionality of their identities as Latinx and Catholic educators and leaders.

Figure 2

Module Content Overview



In addition to professional growth, one of the core elements of the LEAD experience is community; the three highlights of the community experience in LEAD are the winter retreat, summer conference, and four virtual socials. In the spring, animated by their growth in professional knowledge and spirituality, and strengthened by community support, LEAD fellows are asked to create and implement an empowerment project as a way of enacting the virtues and leadership characteristics they have reflected on throughout the year. As part of the empowerment project, LEAD fellows identify a need in their school community and establish a goal to design a solution for this need. During the summer conference that concludes their time in LEAD, participants present their empowerment projects and discuss them with one another. The year-long formation experience speaks to Ganz's (2009) framework for empowering people to lead that change by unpacking the story of self (a call to leadership), the story of us (shared values and experiences), and story of now (strategy and action).

Examining the Impact of this “Sacred Space”

The design of the LEAD program is undergirded by a framework for affinity groups. As described by Pour-Khorshid (2018), affinity groups for educators are “sacred spaces” that are necessary to

support their relational, personal, political, and pedagogical growth. Racial affinity professional development in particular is centered around developing spaces of support, learning and growth, and positive career development that is culturally responsive and sustaining to a specific group (Mosely, 2018). Embedded in affinity group frameworks is the honoring of story-telling, counternarratives, and voice (Kohli et al., 2015). In the case of LEAD, participants self-identified as Latinx Catholic educators and leaders upon entry into the program, which is built upon opportunities to embrace, empower, and educate through storytelling and sharing. The interpretive lens we utilized to frame our coding and approach to understanding how participants make sense of their experiences as a Latinx educator over time was rooted in the critical role that story-telling and counternarratives play in educator affinity groups (Kohli et al., 2015).

In examining the year-long formation program, data from surveys and interviews was analyzed to determine how members of an affinity group described growth and development over the course of the program. We hypothesized that participation in LEAD would lead to deepened networks, spiritual formation, and leadership skill development, promoting retention of leaders from underrepresented groups in Catholic schools. Particularly, we wanted to hear from participants where they were in their leadership journeys prior to participation in the LEAD program and how, if in any ways, their experience as part of the educator affinity group served as a change factor in their decision to pursue further leadership opportunities. Themes emerging from the analysis of surveys and interviews provided evidence of how the program collectively supported the empowerment, advancement, and retention of Latinx leadership in Catholic education.

In order to understand how participants personally experienced growth (or lack thereof) in this affinity group space, we employed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell et al., 2003). Surveys, composed of a symposium inquiry, a program impact inquiry, and an alumni tracking inquiry, were designed to capture participants' experiences during and after the program. The surveys were administered following the year-long formation program in the summer of 2021, fall of 2021, and spring of 2022, respectively. The survey results were combined to portray a multi-faceted understanding of the programmatic experiences. The survey identified participants' previous and current position. Additionally, the survey included questions regarding participants' growth in several areas: leadership, identity, spirituality, advocacy, and personal development, as well as questions asking about their confidence levels leading with theological and cardinal virtues. Open-ended questions inquired about participants' views of a transformational Latinx leader, what it looks like to lead with a virtue-centered approach, their commitment to Catholic education, a description of their empowerment project and impact, a description of most impactful aspects of the program, overall growth as their participation in LEAD, and program feedback.

The 16 participants in LEAD cohort 1 completed the post-surveys. The sample included 15 females and one male who served in various roles in Catholic schools across 11 different (arch)dioceses. Of these 16 participants, nine were classroom teachers, three were assistant/vice principals, two were principals, one was a communications coordinator, and one was an assistant to a principal

at the beginning of their LEAD fellowship. They represented (arch)dioceses covering all regions of the country, from Arlington in the East, to Dallas and Little Rock in the South, and Phoenix and Los Angeles in the West.

We summarized data collected from the surveys and utilized those results to generate topics for the interviews. Questions were developed to elicit personal experiences and narratives and a deeper understanding of the survey results. The research team conducted one-time Zoom interviews with five participants from the first LEAD cohort in the spring of 2022. Through these interviews, we sought to collect participant experiences and understand to what extent involvement in the LEAD program led (or did not lead) to changes in their leadership journey. Four LEAD fellows and one LEAD mentor were selected for follow up interviews based on their sustained engagement with the program throughout their fellowship year and their demonstrated commitment to the pursuit of leadership during and after their participation in the program. The five participants exemplified the vast diversity of positions, perspectives, and challenges that LEAD fellows encounter throughout their journeys in our program and beyond. The interviews were video recorded and transcribed.

The data from the interviews was combined with qualitative data from open-ended survey questions for analysis. After an initial pass through the data, the researchers employed a trained research assistant to conduct open coding that was later affirmed by the research team, identifying commonalities and trends across participant narratives and seeking out inconsistencies in the data (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). The researchers engaged in thematic analysis of the coded passages to uncover salient patterns in the data. Three emergent themes of empowerment, advancement, and retention are discussed in the results section below.

A Case for Empowerment

In terms of participants' growth, the theme of empowerment was salient. Survey responses indicate that 100% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they feel confident in embracing their role as a leader in Catholic schools following the LEAD fellowship. Additionally, 100% of respondents indicated that they felt empowered to enact change in their school and community and to articulate the need for Latino leadership in Catholic schools. Finally, all participants indicated that they felt confident in their ability to lead with faith, prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance, hope, and charity.

When asked what a transformative Latinx leader looks like in Catholic schools, the majority of respondents referred back to empowering local communities, and many referenced their own empowerment projects. The survey also asked participants to summarize their projects and its impact. The projects included creating a club for Latinx students, establishing an engineering program for Latina high school girls, working with Latinx families to better understand college readiness for students,

and creating “lunch bunch clubs” for Spanish-speaking students. These empowerment projects serve as tangible signs of change and leadership initiation and directly address the call to empower leaders.

During the interviews, it was recognized that for LEAD participants Ceci and Anita, this community was one of the first opportunities in their educational careers where their personal understanding and representation of Latinidad was not only offered space, but also affirmed with celebration by their learning community. Both of these women expressed increased hope and energy for their work in Catholic schools after coming to form a clearer image of who they are and the gifts they can offer back to their community. It also reminded them of the strength in their own experience of moving through the world as Latina women and the need to speak more candidly to that experience and the qualities it formed in them. Ceci indicated that she felt “empowered and stronger to go and do more.” This embrace eventually extends beyond the individuals in the program because, as Ceci and Anita have attested, they are now better equipped to more authentically show up as themselves in their work and encourage their own students, many of whom also represent the Latinx community, to do so as well.

A Case for Advancement

Though the first cohort of LEAD fellows would undoubtedly be filled with innovative and engaged participants, our team understood that it would be difficult to pinpoint the exact qualities of an ideal candidate during the program’s pilot recruitment efforts in the fall of 2019. Still, by the following spring it became clear that the strongest applicants of the candidate pool were not only those who carried hopeful energy for the mission of Catholic schools and commitment to their identity as “educators” but also, and perhaps more importantly, dedicated effort to their own personal development as *life-long learners*.

Survey and interview data revealed the theme of advancement to be an important area in which individuals developed. Advancement is a broad term, but the team chose to code advancement as active steps taken toward professional growth. Post-survey results indicated that three participants were accepted into and planning to enroll in a master’s level leadership program, one participant who started a certificate in English as a New Language (ENL), and one participant who began a doctoral program.

In the interviews, Maria and Sofia, highlighted this theme of advancement and growth. At the time of her initial “yes” to this invitation, Maria was serving as a 3rd grade teacher and STEP (Support Team Education Plan) Coordinator at an archdiocesan elementary school. Sofia, on the other hand, was in a different space given her work in higher education at a major Catholic university. Independent of their distinctive roles and day-to-day responsibilities, Maria and Sofia displayed an energy to engage in learning and further their own understanding of their potential

for leadership. Over the course of their time as LEAD fellows, they both discovered a calling to deepen their own qualifications as school leaders as a way of expanding their impact within their respective communities.

As such, our team was ready and eager to connect participants in this position to opportunities within our network, so it came to our great delight when these two members of LEAD cohort 1 connected with members of a leadership certification program, used their fellowship experience to thoughtfully advocate their candidacy for the program, and ultimately earned their spots in leadership cohort. When asked what prompted them to apply to this program at the time, both women spoke to the acknowledgement and affirmation that they received throughout their LEAD fellowship, particularly through early recruitment conversations a year prior and during close mentorship conversations in their small groups. For Maria and Sofia, it often appeared as though the possibility for women, especially those of color, to rise into spaces of leadership were limited even though they knew they carried the same competence and ability to lead as well as others. They shared that their experience as LEAD fellows lifted a mirror to them and reminded them of the truth of who they are and what they have to offer. They may be underrepresented in educational leadership as Latina women, but they are also capable and ready to take a next step to increase their visibility. At the same time, our team also needed to be ready to help facilitate the necessary professional connections and share the resources of our community to leverage them into that next space.

A Case for Retention

Survey results indicate that 93% of all participants intended to remain in education for the upcoming year. One participant was leaving the field of Catholic education in order to begin a doctoral program. However, the participant indicated that she had a strong desire to remain closely connected to her previous Catholic school in some capacity. While the overwhelming majority of participants indicated that they were planning to remain in their current Catholic school, there was some movement of participants to new schools. Four participants at the time of surveying were considering transferring to a different Catholic school.

In the interviews, retention and the desire to stay in Catholic education were common themes, with all five interviewees pointing to their experiences within LEAD, particularly the spiritual experiences, as being a “light” and a “flame” that enkindled or, in some cases, rekindled their commitment to Catholic schools. Additional follow-up regarding particularly influential factors might be useful for future research.

One interview with a LEAD mentor, Marco, shed light on retention in an unexpected way: the retention of established Latinx leaders in Catholic education. Marco did not originally imagine himself working as a Catholic school principal, but he grew into the position after discerning a career change from the business sector. This transition was unexpected for Marco, but he felt

convinced of the deeper vocational calling through the close mentorship of someone in his own local community, Monsignor B. When asked what made this particular mentorship so impactful to him, Marco explained that he and Monsignor B. shared identities, which made him feel known in an uncommon way; he was challenged by his mentor to grow beyond what was comfortable, which prompted him to make an unlikely career switch at a later point in his life; and chief among their mentoring relationship was the routine of praying together, which cultivated a deeper faith and vocational conviction in Marco.

The experience of being mentored is one that Marco often reflects back on as it continues to animate and drive him in his role as one of our current LEAD mentors. It is clear that knowing and sharing identities with his mentees, challenging them to grow beyond comfort, and committing to praying with and for them constantly has led to great synergy in our particular mission and contributed to the hopeful growth in the last few cohorts of LEAD. Even more than this, our team has also seen the ways in which Marco's thoughtful model of mentorship has empowered participants in the program to pursue their own opportunities to mentor others through the direct work they sustain in their school communities. This experience highlights how the role of serving as a LEAD mentor connects at least three generations of more authentic and intentional leadership within underrepresented communities. Our team hopes to continue working closely with the dedicated mentors in our program who not only carry our unique vision for leadership in Catholic education, but also exemplify its inherent value by the model of their lives.

Discussion

As demonstrated through survey results and interviews, members of our affinity group for Catholic Latinx educators and leaders experienced growth and development through the formation opportunity. Evidence shared indicates how this affinity group collectively supported the empowerment, advancement, and retention of these members. Participants indicated that participation expanded networks, deepened spiritual formation, and grew leadership skill development. Additionally, participants shared how they have developed in their vocational discernment and enacted social change. It is to be noted that while the sample size was small, data is being collected with subsequent cohorts, the impact is resoundingly large for these individuals and their school communities.

These are encouraging signs of leadership growth and retention in the field, especially in the current climate when the retention of teachers and leaders is a critical issue. The LEAD program strives to offer participants from underrepresented groups not only the intentional space to reflect and discern, but also the practical support to more inclusively name their strengths and pathways to put those specific, and at times even under-recognized skills. With this being said, it could be argued that selection bias existed within the sample in that participants were likely predisposed to

being committed to the work and seeking leadership opportunities. However, open-ended responses overwhelmingly credit the experience to the “needed push” (Camila, Cohort 1 Participant), “tap on the shoulder” (Luis, Cohort 1 Participant), and “time and space to discern next steps” (Maria, Cohort 1 Participant) to take the leap into leadership. There exists no one definition or understanding of what this experience can mean to people from minoritized identity groups, but we have seen enough people come more “fully alive” (Camila, Cohort 1 Participant) as a result of the long-overdue recognition and celebration of cultural identities that for too long have gone under or misrepresented. One participant described the formation as an opportunity to embrace their whole personhoods through the communal celebration of Latinidad. Of course, there are as many different forms of representing “Latinidad” as there are Latinxs in our world.

One of the primary goals of the LEAD program is to offer recognition to and amplification of experiences of people from the Latinx community who have, more often than not, experienced a minimization of their own identity and culture over the course of their personal and professional lives. We recognize the ways in which consistent underrepresentation, especially in spaces of educational leadership, can become a self-perpetuating problem. In other words, we cannot even yet begin to fully see the missed opportunity for transformational leadership if potential leaders from underrepresented groups do not feel seen and supported enough to aspire for said leadership roles to begin with.

When asked about what aspect of the program was the most impactful, the results were fairly evenly distributed between culturally sustaining mentoring, collective community cultivation, and spiritual discernment. This affirms the interconnectedness of these tenets in the model design, as well as the fact that the three key components are intentionally woven into the program in equitable fashion. Interestingly, when asked for program feedback, the responses were simply *more*, as in more mentoring, more community, more spiritual development, and a longer program.

The formation of LEAD was rooted in frameworks for affinity groups that support relational, personal, political, and pedagogical growth (Pour-Khorshid, 2018). It is to be noted that there exists national backlash against equity and inclusion initiatives like affinity groups. Recently, four complaints and a federal lawsuit have been filed against school districts for providing safe spaces for educators of students of color. The complaints regard affinity groups to be in violation of the Civil Rights Act and the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment (Pendharkar, 2022). It remains to be seen what the outcomes of this backlash will entail, but evidences here suggest that cultural and racial affinity groups, such as LEAD, are positive and hopeful, not only for individuals, but for communities as a whole. Overall, based on survey results, the LEAD formation program is an effective lever of individual and community empowerment as demonstrated by projects enacted during the experience, advancement as indicated by the high percentage of participants stepping into leadership roles, and retention as illustrated by the significant percentage of participants remaining in the field of Catholic education.

Limitations

It is important that as a field, we work to enhance the scholarship around Latinx leadership formation in Catholic education. It is imperative that (arch)dioceses, university partners, and local schools be at the forefront of preparing Latinx educators and leaders, and that research-based best practices be disseminated. This small pilot study hopefully sparks deeper interest and investment in the topic, as well as deeper inquiry.

The positive responses shared here are encouraging; however, these questions should lead to further questions of the impact of this growth upon the individual and their students, school, and broader community. In future iterations of cohort surveys, larger impact questions will be considered, as well as measuring these items as pre- and post-program growth, to more completely capture the effectiveness of the intervention. Additionally, to continue to consider the long-term impact of LEAD, as well as the development and retention of Latinx educators in Catholic schools who will be members of future cohorts of LEADers, we intend to track past and future cohorts, conduct a longitudinal review of the program and its participants at years five and 10, and expand our surveys to include members of school communities where LEAD fellows serve. Through these initiatives, we can better understand the correlation between LEADers' engagement in the program and their impact in their communities. Finally, by including more LEAD fellows and individuals from their school communities, we hope to address the limitations of a small sample size by collecting more data points that can help us determine the impact of Latinx educators' participation in LEAD on the academic and non-academic development of their students and the school community at large.

Conclusion

Even in its early stages of development, the impact of this affinity group for Latinx educators and leaders is tangible and timely. The successes found in this initiative beg to be replicated, multiplied, and invested in. The significance of this work was unequivocally affirmed by Opsino and Wyttenbach (2022):

Our findings demonstrate convincingly that Catholic schools in the U.S. are and will be further enriched by the presence and contributions of Hispanic teachers and leaders. As we plan for a stronger future for Catholic education in our country, we must make a renewed commitment to invest and cultivate talent within the Hispanic community. Now is the time. (p. 5)

Additionally, [Darder \(2016\)](#) implored the field to reframe its approach to educating Latinx students:

By effectively interpreting, with courage and resolve, the oppressive conditions at work in the lives of Latino students, Latino Catholic educators, in particular, can serve as a viable

humanizing force in this work. Anchored in an intimate knowledge of culture, history, language, and the biculturation experience, the Church in general and Catholic education in particular can begin to enter into a new relationship with Latino communities—one in which the voices and participation of Latino students reside at the center of the educational discourse, rather than ignored or forgotten on the margins. (p. 48).

There is an absence of structured opportunities for spiritual, as well as personal and professional, development for Latinx educators in Catholic schools. Empowering Catholic Latinx educators through a model of culturally sustaining mentoring that embraces their identities and backgrounds, cultivates meaningful community-based professional networks, and integrates spirituality in leadership development, can provide pathways for deeper empowerment, advancement, and retention of this population of critical educators and leaders. We are hopeful that the findings from this pilot study can aid in the creation of similar initiatives for professional development and culturally responsive mentorship programs in (arch)dioceses in order to more sustainably and intentionally support Latinx representation and leadership in their communities. Latinx educators are essential to the vitalization of our Catholic schools and Church, as they enrich our schools with their God-given gifts and deep commitment to serve traditionally underrepresented populations.

Catholic schools were founded in the United States over a century ago to serve immigrant and other marginalized populations in a Gospel-centered environment that honored the inherent God-given dignity, gifts, and culture of each child, family, educator, and community. Our Catholic schools continue to stand as sacred spaces of hope for families and communities, and, alongside our parishes, they are yearning to be transformed and reanimated. The call to embrace, educate, and empower Latinx educators and leaders does nothing less than ensure the future of Catholic education and the Church. Bridging this great legacy to the present and future, our Catholic schools can be footholds where Latinx educators and leaders can *fortalecer raíces y formar alas* [strengthen roots and form wings], and extend this same formation to their students, families, and communities.

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