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Rethinking the Hispanic Teacher Shortage: Dual Language Schools as Identity-Affirming Organizations

*Elena Sada*¹ and *Katie Ward*¹

Abstract: Research has established the connection between the academic success of culturally and linguistically diverse students, and their schools' ability to recruit and retain teachers that reflect such diversity (Shirrell et al., 2019). Studies have also highlighted the criticality of the students' home language use as a way to enhance academic growth and develop their sociocultural competence and well-being (Feinauer & Howard, 2014). There is no research, however, addressing the differences between the experiences of Hispanic teachers in bilingual Catholic education compared to those in monolingual English Catholic education. This article highlights the differences captured by a recent study, and discusses the potential lessons learned from these differences—including their connection to the recruitment and retention of Hispanic bilingual teachers. It concludes by proposing meaningful future research, and by offering recommendations to (a) affirm bilingual Hispanic identities and (b) positively impact educators' career choices and their students' academic experiences.

Keywords: bilingual teacher, identity affirmation, dual language, teacher shortage, bilingual education, catholic education

An extensive body of research has established the connection between the academic success of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students and their schools' ability to recruit and retain teachers that reflect such diversity (Shirrell et al., 2019). A recent study that captures the perceptions and motivations of a diverse educational workforce positions Hispanic teachers in Catholic education as holding fundamental roles, while being challenged by systems that have not always supported their career paths nor affirmed their identities. Many of this study's findings

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were captured in [Ospino and Wyttenbach's \(2022\)](#) report, *Cultivating Talent: A Summary of Findings from the National Study Examining Pathways to Increase the Presence of Hispanic Teachers and Leaders in Catholic Schools* (hereafter, “*Cultivating Talent*”) published by the Roche Center for Catholic Education, at the Lynch School for Education and Human Development at Boston College. In the report, however, data offering specific information on factors affecting Hispanic educators in bilingual versus monolingual settings were left untapped due to length constraints. This article highlights and organizes those findings, framing them within the concept of identity and relevant literature.

The comparison between the experiences of Hispanic teachers in bilingual versus English monolingual settings is meaningful because it sheds light on missed or leveraged opportunities in their recruitment and retention. Hispanic teachers in bilingual settings praise the fact that their bilingualism is seen as an asset and not something that needs to be fixed ([Sada, 2017](#)), and this maximizes job satisfaction and personal fulfillment ([DeMatthews & Izquierdo, 2017](#); [Howard & López-Velázquez, 2019](#)). This research suggests that Catholic bilingual schools tend to be more affirming than non-bilingual schools—meaning that more Hispanic teachers in bilingual settings feel that Hispanic heritage is reflected in school events and environments, that they work with other Hispanic colleagues, and that their school is committed to serving Hispanic students. This finding corroborates previous research in connection to the advantages of matching student and educators’ demographics in school settings ([Egalite & Kisida, 2017](#)). Data from this research, however, offer a novel approach, as this is the first study comparing Hispanic teachers in Catholic bilingual schools with Hispanic teachers in monolingual English Catholic schools.

After making a case for identity affirmation as a conceptual framework and connecting the study with previous research in the area of bilingual teacher school experiences, this article will present a summary of study findings. It will then discuss implications pertaining to school designs and models and point toward potential future research that can continue to advance our understanding of bilingual settings’ implications for teachers and students in Catholic schools.

Conceptual Framework

Identity Affirmation and Imagined Worlds

In this study, *identities* are defined as self-understandings, “especially those with strong resonance for the teller” ([Holland et al., 1998, p. 3](#)) and as how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, “how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” ([Norton, 2013, p. 5](#); [Sada, 2020, p. 11](#))

From this perspective, identities are not simply ways in which individuals identify themselves, but are also “relational” and “positional,” since people’s “choices (or positions) are not socially neutral” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 126). This definition of identity is meaningful here because it looks at how Hispanic teachers see themselves (and shape their identities) through the eyes of others. Unfortunately, choices and/or identifiers such as accents, language use, traditions, skin color, and wardrobe have historically placed individuals within a social status or category—where social and leadership mobility is difficult—and certain claims for a better life can be either accessed or restricted. These choices and/or identifiers are perceived by others within relationships and tend to position individuals as majoritized superiors or minoritized inferiors, forging static identities.

Furthermore, Holland et al. (1998)—building on Anderson’s (1983) and Caughey’s (1984) idea—state that “by modeling possibilities, imaginary worlds can inspire new actions” (p. 49); this in turn leads identities to reshape, evolve, and acquire new facets and different status, provoking other new actions that work as reinforcers of the new identity. This frame serves as our paradigm and helps us see identities as intersectional and moldable, rather than static and single faceted. It also offers parameters for our “identity affirmation” definition, since to affirm identities is to offer leverage in others’ imagined worlds, demonstrating genuine positive dispositions toward an individual’s various attributes (including linguistic and cultural identifiers) and producing a sense of belonging and self-worth. For example, when we act genuinely interested in someone’s specific language or tradition and learn from them, or when we actively listen to someone’s perspectives and ideas, seeking to create synergies out of differences, we are positioning that individual’s identifiers and contributions as precious resources in our community—creating an imagined caste-free world where we all belong. Subsequently, that imagined world moves individuals to produce more acts and language of acceptance, appreciation, and affirmation.

Identity affirmation is at the core of this study because it emerged as a key factor when analyzing the differences between Hispanic teachers in bilingual and English-only settings. In our sample of Hispanic teachers, 86 teach in a monolingual English Catholic school (as the language of instruction), and 55 teach in a dual language Catholic school. Dual language schools have the goal of maintaining students’ home language while developing English and/or bilingualism. Teachers in these programs teach grade-level content in two languages, typically English and a language other than English (LOTE); often, the LOTE is a language that many of the students speak at home. There are multiple advantages of dual language education. These can include new neuroscientific understandings (e.g., brain plasticity, adaptability, and creativity; Fox et al., 2019); socioemotional benefits (e.g., intergenerational intercommunication; Farruggio, 2010) or sociocultural competence (e.g., openness to diverse perspectives and dialogue facilitation; Liberman et al., 2016); and practical benefits (e.g., bilingualism in the workplace; Gándara, 2018). Recently, studies have focused on the benefits that bilingual settings bring to identity affirmation and the effect

that this affirmation has on individuals' wellness (Cummings et al., 2015; Sada, 2020; Shin, 2017). As Catholic education adopts dual language education—with 45 known programs in the country—leaders are seeing that bilingual and pluricultural perspectives offer an ideal venue to foster the Christian principle of social justice (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000) while laying the foundation for the aforementioned benefits.

Literature Review

Our review of the literature encompasses research that has successfully connected students' academic performance and the teachers' population representation. The review also includes a body of research highlighting the positive effects of using students' native language in instruction. Bridging these two concepts—the similarities in population representation between students and teachers (specifically, between Hispanic, Spanish-speaking students and teachers) and the use of students' home language—is significant, because we posit the dependence between these concepts: Effective bilingual education requires bilingual teachers or teachers that can use the students' home language. Further, we suggest that the more we succeed in recruiting and retaining bilingual teachers, the more we will set CLD students up for success. The review concludes with an overview of the presence of Hispanic educators in Catholic schools, including their motivations, supports, and challenges in their professional pathways.

A Faculty that Reflects the Student Population

To improve the academic success of CLD students, schools must be able to recruit and retain teachers that reflect their students' diversity. Students whose teachers match their racial identity have more positive perceptions of their teachers' care for them, experience higher levels of interest in their schoolwork, and have more positive outcomes in teacher–student communication and guidance compared to peers who do not have a racial identity match with their teachers (Castro & Calzada, 2021). Studies also show that middle school students who have a racial identity match with their teacher are more likely to consider going to college because of their teacher's influence, and elementary students with a racial identity match with their teacher can more easily understand what they are learning in class based on how their teacher explains it (Castro & Calzada, 2021). Teachers of color have been shown to be particularly well suited to explaining material in a culturally relevant and engaging way—crucial for the success of CLD students (Castro & Calzada, 2021). This emphasizes the importance of hiring and retaining teachers who reflect the identities of their students.

This positive impact of teacher match and teacher bilingualism is especially important in the education of Hispanic students. Hispanic students are less likely to be suspended from school when they have Hispanic teachers, allowing them to have more instructional time and focus and to complete their studies (Shirrell et al., 2019). Bilingual Hispanic teachers in particular also have

higher levels of Hispanic student achievement, compared to monolingual Hispanic teachers and non-Hispanic teachers; this is due to bilingual Hispanic teachers' self-efficacy in using effective mainstream and culturally responsive teaching practices (Egalite & Kisida, 2017). To effectively serve Hispanic students and promote their academic success, schools must recruit and retain Hispanic teachers through creating school environments that support their identity affirmation.

Linguistic Choices that Reflect Schools' Languages

School, district, and diocesan administrators face many choices when establishing an educational model and instructional programs. One choice concerns language use for instruction and for learning. While most schools teach students to code switch between social and academic language during instruction (Ballinger et al., 2017), most overlook *translanguaging*—the ability to use the students' entire linguistic repertoire in the language(s) they know—during instruction. Translanguaging, however, is an effective way to develop metalinguistic skills in bilingual and multilingual students, which in turn fosters literacy, cognitive development, and cultural and linguistic identity affirmation (Hopewell & Escamilla, 2015). Research has shown that capitalizing on students' home language, by creating spaces during instruction when students can make linguistic connections, leads to more effective language development (including English and the LOTE or home language development; Howard et al. 2018; Lindholm-Leary, 2012), among the many aforementioned benefits. Hispanic educators play key roles in reflecting the identities of their students: They promote students' use of their home language to support their academic growth, and they model sociocultural competence and well-being. In order to recruit and retain Hispanic teachers, schools must affirm the identities of those educators to create welcoming spaces (Baez Cruz, 2021; Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022).

Hispanic Educators in Catholic Schools

The *Cultivating Talent* study suggests that Hispanic teachers in Catholic education are highly motivated, driven by values, and supported in their professional success by a sense of Hispanic support and mentorship (Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022). Over half of the Hispanic teachers have considered running for public office. Two thirds knew that they would become a teacher early on, and affirmed that there was a Hispanic teacher role model whom they admired and who inspired them in their decision to enter the profession. Hispanic teachers also stated that being Hispanic and working in a place that aligns with their values is important (75% of them selected this as key in their job choice). Most (86%) agreed that their work helps them live their life's purpose, and all of them affirmed receiving orientation regarding the diocese or network's mission, beliefs, and values as essential part of their decision to teach within that context. However, 44% have considered leaving Catholic education, with 81% responding that it is due to low salary and/or lack of benefits, and 26% agreeing that there is no room for growth. Furthermore, the research points

toward a potential sense of isolation among Hispanic educators; with only 38% of teachers having the opportunity to collaborate, and with only 41% having a mentor—and 20% meeting with their mentor on a weekly basis. Only 9% of Hispanic teachers in Catholic education were encouraged by a pastor to become a teacher; however, there were some cases where the pastor's influence in positioning parishioners as educators became evident and helpful for these to discover alignment between the teaching profession and their ideals.

Methods

Data Collection

Data for this article come from the (2022) *Cultivating Talent* study, conducted through the Roche Center for Catholic Education at Boston College. The data were gathered via a national survey, focus groups, and interviews. All research activity and materials were approved by the Boston College Institutional Review Board. Participants in the study were Catholic school teachers and school leaders who identified as Hispanic. The survey was disseminated through a database of Hispanic and non-Hispanic Catholic school leaders developed internally at the Roche Center for Catholic Education. Participants took the survey through Qualtrics. The survey included one set of questions for all respondents and separate sets of additional questions for teachers, and a second set for school leaders. Participants were asked to indicate their role in their school and received the corresponding survey. They were also asked whether they worked in a dual language school. Data collection via the survey took place from July and November 2021.

Survey questions reflected the theoretical framework for the *Cultivating Talent* study. Items focused on a vocational survey across four domains: (a) personal discernment, (b) discernment with(in) the institution, (c) from the community into the Catholic school, and (d) from the Catholic school into the community. Responses to these questions provided insights on the experience of Hispanic educators in Catholic schools.

Sample

For this article, we used only data from teachers' responses from [Ospino and Wyttenbach's \(2022\)](#) report, separating those working in dual language schools and those in English-only schools; among these, 86 teach in English-only Catholic schools (as the language of instruction) and 55 in dual language Catholic schools. The complete teacher sample identifies as Catholic (97%) and as female (81%); 37% are under 40; 67% are married, of whom the majority have children (66%); and 42% enrolled their children or grandchildren in the school where they teach. This study also indicates that the Hispanic educators in Catholic schools in the United States are highly qualified: They have an average of 13.7 years of teaching experience, 58.3% have a master's degree, 9.6% have a doctoral degree, and 64% are licensed (by states) as teachers.

Results

The study found key differences in the motivations, contexts, and experiences of Hispanic teachers in dual language Catholic schools in comparison to those in monolingual English Catholic schools.

Motivations

Growing up, 78% of dual language teachers wanted to be teachers, compared to 48% of non-dual language teachers. The former teachers were then supported in their aspirations, with 82% of dual language teachers receiving encouragement from others to become a teacher compared to 61% of non-dual language teachers. They were also supported in their school contexts; 74% of dual language teachers had Hispanic teachers or role models in their schools to whom they could look up when exploring the profession, compared with 50% of non-dual language school teachers. Dual language school teachers also plan on remaining longer in Catholic education than non-dual language teachers, with 73% of dual language teachers saying they are planning on remaining in Catholic education as long as they are able, compared to 65% of non-dual language teachers.

Dual language teachers were also often motivated by the opportunity to work with Hispanic students and families. When considering taking a role in their Catholic school, dual language teachers (47%) were more likely to cite their school's commitment to serving Hispanic children and families as a motivating factor when compared to non-dual language teachers (18%). This also supported them in remaining at their schools: 27.78% of non-dual language Hispanic teachers have considered leaving their schools because of a lack of diversity among students and families, compared to 5% of dual language teachers.

These motivations that affirm dual language teachers' identities are more meaningful when considered alongside their low compensation: 65% of bilingual Hispanic teachers rank their salary as 1 or 2 (out of 5), with one quarter of them making less than \$40,000 a year; and, when considering their active involvement in school leadership, Hispanic teachers in dual language Catholic schools are often entrusted with leadership roles in curriculum development and outreach projects, since only one quarter of principals in dual language Catholic schools in the United States speak the partner language (Spanish, Mandarin, and Lakota).

Context and Collaboration

The school contexts of dual language teachers and non-dual language teachers also vary. Teachers in dual language schools more often see their identity and culture reflected in the school, its students, and its staff than non-dual language teachers. Dual language teachers respond at higher rates than non-dual language teachers that their schools center on Hispanic heritage, provide

interpretation and bilingual materials for families, involve families in the planning of cultural events, and have art that represents the Hispanic community. They also see Hispanic heritage reflected in the Catholic identity of the school at higher rates; 79% of dual language teachers always or often feel their schools' Catholic traditions reflect their cultural background, compared to 49% of non-dual language teachers. This correlates with the fact that 96% of the parishes of the schools where dual language teachers work have a Mass in Spanish, compared to 60% of the parishes of the non-dual language schools.

Dual language teachers are also more likely to work with other Hispanic teachers and school leaders, finding representation and mentorship through their collaboration: 76% of dual language teachers have Hispanic school leaders in their school, compared to 50% of non-dual language teachers. Likewise, 98% of dual language teachers work with other Hispanic faculty, compared to 90% of non-dual language teachers. This is then reflected in mentorship. Dual language teachers are more likely to seek out mentorship from other Hispanic teachers, leaders, and staff in their schools than non-dual language teachers, and they are more likely to have Hispanic mentor teachers (53%) than non-dual language teachers (25%). This all contributes to a school community in which Hispanic teachers are more likely to remain in their positions. Only 5% of dual language teachers have considered leaving their Catholic school because of a lack of diversity among the staff, compared to 31% of non-dual language teachers.

Experience as *Gente Puente*

The experiences of dual language teachers in their schools also differ from those of non-dual language teachers, particularly in their own identity formation as members of their school community. Dual language teachers see themselves as *gente puente*—defined in the study as “bridge builders,” or individuals who intentionally build relationships (Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022). This relationship with others as *gente puente* expands to other Hispanic teachers, Hispanic families, the non-Hispanic community, Church leaders, and community leaders, and it is present at higher rates than among non-dual language teachers; an example of this is that 54% of dual language teachers engage in advocacy around concerns of the Hispanic community, such as food insecurity, access to education, and immigration, compared to 40% of non-dual language teachers.

Discussion

Based on the research findings, dual language Catholic schools are more affirming spaces for Hispanic teachers, and are therefore more equitable contexts for Hispanic students and educators. This corroborates with existing literature that connects affinity of educators' ethnicity and race with student success, and research connecting identity affirmation and work satisfaction (Baez Cruz, 2021).

However, even within dual language and identity affirmation spaces, more attention needs to be given to supporting teachers in other concrete ways. Study findings indicate that many Hispanic teachers must hold a second job to make ends meet, and many have considered leaving their current Catholic school seeking better-paid salaries. This points to an underappreciation for the bilingual workforce and suggests that Hispanic bilingual teachers see themselves as candidates for better salaries and spaces where they can utilize their bilingual skills. It also indicates that in many cases (at least a quarter of them), their households cannot afford one or two low-paying jobs. Hispanic bilingual teachers participate in school program development at greater rates than those in monolingual English schools, and their compensation should also reflect this.

We have established dual language schools as stronger identity affirmation spaces for students and teachers, and for students' academic and sociocultural achievement and competence. We have also established the need for a bilingual workforce in connection to teacher fulfillment and student achievement. According to this analysis, it is crucial to attend to factors that will enhance the recruitment and retention of bilingual Hispanic educators. The analysis points toward the following two: the development of more dual language schools, and the inclusion of factors that support teacher professional development and identity appreciation. Educators seek organizations where their cultural, ethnic, and linguistic identities are seen as assets: gifts to themselves, the school community, and society. Bilingualism and identity diversity are not a deficit—something to be fixed rapidly enough for students to enter English-only classrooms. Rather, they represent talents that need to be celebrated, nurtured, and reflected in our educational programs and organizational structures, including in teachers' salaries.

Identity and identity intersectionality are social constructs (Gonzalez, 2009; Norton, 2013); teachers' identities evolve, molded by schools' organizational factors and instructional programs. Identities can radically be shaped by moments of improvisations (Holland et al. 1998), in which a structural or organizational change sends the message to teachers that their intersectional identities are an asset and that they will be included as part of the program, along with the students'. Positioning Hispanic educators as talented educators (in part because of their background and language) is fundamental to the Catholic school community, and Christian social justice. Identity shapes people's imagined world and the future for which they strive; identities—individual and shared—also shape the future of institutions to which people belong (Sada, 2020).

Future Research

As the sample used was a subset of the total sample in the “National Study Examining Pathways to Increase the Presence of Hispanic Teachers and Leaders in Catholic Schools,” a future study with a larger sample of teachers in dual language Catholic schools would offer additional insights. A team at the Roche Center for Catholic Education at Boston College is currently working on a

study addressing this need, focusing on the organizational characteristics that affect the recruitment and retention of dual language Catholic school teachers; this includes identifying ways that (a) schools serve as identity-affirming spaces and (b) those efforts support the recruitment and retention of bilingual educators. Insights from this survey can inform both dual language Catholic schools and monolingual English Catholic schools, and shed light on how to create identity-affirming spaces which support bilingual teachers and potential educators to join their school communities and remain in their positions. Data from [Ospino and Wyttenbach's \(2022\)](#) report and from the present article's analysis can serve as a foundation for further research examining leadership qualities, organizational conditions, teacher pipeline support, and other factors which influence identity affirmation for Hispanic bilingual and non-bilingual educators.

Conclusion

The concepts of identity and identity affirmation, in connection with imagined worlds, constituted the frame for this research, in which we examined the shortage, recruitment, and retention of bilingual teachers. To examine the identities of bilingual teachers, we analyzed not-yet-published data from a larger data set used by Ospino and Wyttenbach in their (2022) report, *Cultivating Talent: A Summary of Findings from the National Study Examining Pathways to Increase the Presence of Hispanic Teachers and Leaders in Catholic Schools*. We desegregated information from two subsamples, Hispanic teachers in monolingual English Catholic schools (as language of instruction) and in dual language Catholic schools. The differences reflected in their perceptions of identity, fulfillment, and affirmation led to relevant findings in the areas of motivation, context, collaboration, and being *gente puente*. Key findings target (a) dual language education as a particularly affirming space for cultural, ethnic and linguistic identities, and (b) the prevailing teacher perception that schools need to enhance appreciation for their work and talents specifically through better monetary remuneration.

Educators seek organizations in which their cultural, ethnic, and linguistic identities are seen as assets—gifts to themselves, the school community, and to society. Identity and identity intersectionality are social constructs ([Gonzalez, 2009](#); [Norton, 2013](#)). Moreover, teachers' identities are shaped by their school (organization, leadership, programs, etc.) through *improvisations* ([Holland et al., 1998](#)): school actions or decisions that carry an identity-shaper message—one of deficit or one that is asset-based. Positioning Hispanic educators as talented educators and paying them accordingly is fundamental to the Catholic identity and social doctrine. The identities that educators forge (e.g., via school structures, programs, leaders, and mandates) also influence community and societal identities, which in turn determine the imagined world students and teachers develop, and the one on which they will base their actions. If schools seek to recruit talented Hispanic and bilingual teachers, they must have imagined worlds ([Anderson, 1983](#); [Holland et al., 1998](#)) where populations' cultural, ethnic, and linguistic identities are considered assets—and this consideration must be reflected in schools' instructional programs, structures, and compensation.

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