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John L. Beltramo
Santa Clara University

Lisa Archuleta
Stanford University

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Paschal Space of Healing and Community: An Affinity Group for Catholic School Teachers of Color

*John Beltramo*¹ and *Lisa Archuleta*²

Abstract: As Catholic schools seek to recruit and retain more ethnoracially diverse faculties, we examine one site of potential support for Catholic school teachers of color – a racial affinity group. Using critical research methodology with qualitative data collection, we studied five teachers of color who engaged in weekly affinity group meetings, which were structured as Freirian culture circles and ran over a period of five months. Using a Catholic, critical framework on teacher education, we analyzed the data (culture circle recordings, written reflections, baseline and comparative interviews, along with classroom observations and debriefs) to examine how teachers’ participation impacted their sense of community as Catholic school educators. We found that engagement in these spaces cultivated strong perceptions of community and solidarity for members through their experiences of authenticity, cultural understanding, professional development, and validation.

Keywords: teachers of color, equity, teacher education

As Catholic school enrollment becomes more ethnoracially diverse (Smith & Huber, 2022), scholars have called for ways to more fully support the recruitment and retention of teachers of color in Catholic education (Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022). Research suggests that teachers of color (in both public and Catholic school settings) are associated with numerous affordances for all students, especially students of color, including raising achievement levels, acting as cultural brokers and advocates, establishing caring and trusted relationships with students, undertaking culturally relevant teaching, and holding students to high expectations (Felix, 2022; Gist, 2017; Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022).

¹ Santa Clara University

² Stanford University

Despite the opportunities that teachers of color bring to Catholic schools, their numbers remain quite low due to a host of factors, including experiences of “discrimination, alienation, and tokenism” (Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022, p.18); pressures to submit to a “a hidden curriculum of assimilation” (Darder, 2016, p.21) that stifles their diverse cultural and linguistic expressions (Ospino & Weitzel-O’Neill, 2016); alienation from negative stereotyping and deficit perspectives toward students of color (Aldana, 2016); and expectations for additional workload and responsibilities not shared by their white colleagues (Felix, 2022).

Scholars contend that if Catholic school leaders seek to partner more intentionally and effectively with teachers of color, then approaches toward helping such teachers belong in Catholic schools deserve particular attention today (Felix, 2022; Sanchez, 2018). Research in both public and Catholic education in particular underscores the opportunity for teachers of color to experience community, solidarity, and support through professional development groups centered on racial affinity (Kohli, 2019; Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022). The following study explores one approach – Freirian culture circles as racial affinity groups – aimed at facilitating a sense of community for Catholic school teachers of color. In particular, we address the following question: In what ways can participation in a racial affinity group support the sense of community experienced by Catholic school teachers of color? We propose that exploring spaces of belonging specifically designed for Catholic school teachers of color will afford the field examples of how to support a more diverse teacher workforce in Catholic school – a workforce that more fully reflects not only the student bodies it serves but also the ethnoracial and cultural mosaic found within our Catholic Church.

Catholic, Critical Perspective on Community for Teachers of Color

We approach teacher education from a Catholic and critical theoretical framing (Freire, 1970; Nuzzi, 2012). Nuzzi (2012) posits that endeavors into Catholic education center three key mysteries of faith. The first mystery, the Incarnation, recognizes in all of creation God’s holy presence, which bestows on humanity our inherent dignity. The second mystery, the Trinity, emphasizes the perfect relationship comprising God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and it invites humanity to recognize the divine community God has created by joining God and one another in close relationship. The third mystery, the Paschal Mystery, embraces Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection and reminds humanity that transformation into closer relationship with God and others is possible by moving away from the pain of sin and isolation, dying to our former imperfect ways, and more fully loving God, self, and others. These three mysteries of faith hold powerful implications for teaching and teacher education, particularly from a critical perspective.

The Incarnation calls teachers and teacher educators to recognize the human dignity of all students by adopting an asset orientation – acknowledging students’ unique gifts and talents;

valuing their cultural repertoires and knowledge; and supporting students to expand these blessings through continual learning (Beltramo et al., 2022; Nuzzi, 2012; Stillman & Beltramo, 2019). Unfortunately, due to the sin of racism (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2018), the assets of students and teachers from historically marginalized communities have often been ignored, derogated, and even banned by school policies (Bettini et al., 2022), especially when their languages, ways of knowing, and cultural practices clash with “whiteness,” or the social norms, ways of being, and linguistic practices associated with white and middle-class cultural expectations prevalent in U.S. society (Milner, 2015). Because whiteness pervades much of schooling and teacher education (Sleeter, 2001), students and teachers of color are often subject to a deficit discourse that views their cultures and upbringing as problems associated with a lack of success in U.S. schooling, essentially blaming minoritized communities for the failures of schooling systems that devalue them (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

The mystery of the Trinity invites Catholic schools to heed the Church’s call toward “revealing” God’s divine community on earth by creating close relationships among students, teachers, staff, administrators, clergy, families, and parishioners (Nuzzi, 2012). From a critical perspective, a such community of transformation emerges through the development of key dispositions among learners (Freire, 1970): hope, or belief in the possibility of positive change; faith, or an abiding trust in others; love, or the sincere, deep, and positive regard and attachment toward others; and a commitment to dialogue, or the open exchange of ideas among learners, particularly around commonly held challenges. Where these elements coalesce, there emerges both the tight bonds of community and the conditions for continual growth (Freire, 1970). While much of the literature in Catholic education recognizes the centrality of transformational community within the experience of Catholic school members (e.g., Bryk, 1996; Walch, 1996), recent scholarship has pointed to contrasting experiences for teachers of color, ones marked by deficit orientations (Aldana, 2016), pressure to assimilate to white norms of professionalism (Darder, 2016), and few opportunities to reflect on or express their ethnoracial, linguistic, and cultural identities at their school sites (Ospino & Wyttenbach, 2022). Such marginalization devalues and pushes teachers of color away from their school communities, the very places that they are called to create relationships with their students and colleagues (Felix, 2022).

Christ’s Paschal mystery of suffering, death, and resurrection holds implications particularly for such current challenges facing teachers of color in schools today. Critical scholars such as Freire and Hunter (1984), along with the USCCB (2018), encourage institutions to come to terms with the suffering and marginalization that racism and other systems have wrought on racially and culturally diverse communities, to die to the ‘former selves’ of past policies and practices that have enabled injustice, and to work toward an Easter moment of transformation through more inclusive and welcoming approaches. In particular, the Paschal mystery asks what Catholic schools and teacher development can change to become spaces where all can find Christ and belonging together

(Oldenski, 2013). This raises the question as to how Catholic schools can create supportive structures of welcoming and community for teachers of color.

Racial Affinity Spaces for Teachers of Color

To help teachers of color find welcoming and transformative professional community, scholars have advocated for the creation and study of racial affinity groups (Stovall & Mosely, 2023), spaces where teachers of color can intentionally gather on a regular basis “to create a supportive community to validate and reflect on [their] experiences in order to maintain [their] drive to teach” (Strong et al., 2017, p.135). Previous research has only explored racial affinity groups for teachers who work in public-school settings, but it surfaces many affordances: These spaces offer teachers of color a reprieve from the pressure and expectations of whiteness at their schools (Pour-Khorshid, 2018), allow participants to explore more fully their identities in the context of teaching and teacher education (Kohli, 2019), recognize and value the full human dignity of participants (Kulkarni et al., 2022), develop their culturally responsive pedagogies (Kohli et al., 2021), and increase their retention in schools (Strong et al., 2017).

Despite these affordances, racial affinity groups for teachers are not without their detractors (e.g., Blevins, 2024; Hess, 2021), who generally raise two primary concerns: that racial affinity groups discriminate in ways that sow resentment and even more racism where little to none existed, and that empirical research on them is scant. While large-scale, quantitative studies of racial affinity groups indeed have yet to emerge in this field, and no known studies have examined racial affinity spaces in Catholic schools, numerous qualitative studies of teachers affinity spaces in publicly funded schools, including those cited and others (e.g., Baker-Doyle & Mawhinney, 2024; Harris, 2022; Kohli et al., 2015; Mawhinney et al., 2024; Mosely, 2018; Shah et al., 2022; Teacher of Color Collective & Souto-Manning, 2022; Varghese et al., 2019), have been published across reputable academic journals for nearly a decade. Importantly, across this literature, no study has found that participants reported greater animosity toward or bias against members of other ethnoracial groups as a result of their participation in affinity space. Instead, extant literature has highlighted that racial affinity spaces for teachers in publicly funded schools have promoted resilience and healing in the face of discrimination.

For example, Pizarro and Kohli (2020) examined the experiences of three female teachers of color who had participated racial affinity groups as part of a series of critical professional learning workshops for teachers of color in a school district. Pizarro and Kohli (2020) found that, despite frequent experiences of microaggressions and/or overt instances of racism at their school sites, the participants expressed plans to remain in the profession because of the relationships of understanding and hope created through their racial affinity groups. In a more recent study, Suarez and colleagues (2024) explored a small racial affinity group for males of color that met monthly

over two years to discuss experiences – particularly of isolation – at their respective school sites within a large district. The authors found that participants interpreted their affinity spaces as opportunities to find common ground and language about their isolation, which then allowed them to experience greater meaning in their work as teachers. Perhaps most importantly, these two examples of studies highlight racial affinity groups’ potential for helping teachers of color find and develop transformative community with one another.

White and colleagues (2023) theorize that this sense of community developed specifically in racial affinity groups for teachers is facilitated through experiences of (a) authenticity, (b) cultural understanding, (c) professional learning, and (d) validation. When gathering in such spaces, teachers of color experience authenticity as they are given opportunities “to express their full positionality as educators of color without judgment” (White et al., 2023, p.137). In racial affinity groups, teachers of color not only share and engage in common cultural and linguistic repertoires, but they are also given opportunities to articulate their experiences of marginalization through microaggressions, deficit views, and erasures at their school sites and/or teacher education programs (Pour-Khorshid, 2018; Stovall & Mosely, 2023). Teachers then use such spaces for collective learning and development, specifically as members co-create new tools for responding to instances, practices, and policies that threaten their identities and those of their students (Kohli et al., 2015; Varghese et al., 2019). Finally, the experiences that teachers share with one another in these affinity spaces are affirmed as worthy; teachers of color are heard, believed, and validated, especially as multiple members of the space find commonality in the moments of suffering that they have undergone at their respective school sites (Kulkarni et al., 2022; Mosely, 2018).

Given the strong empirical and theoretical support for the potential of affinity groups to cultivate a sense of community for teachers of color, scholars in Catholic education such as Ospino and Wyttenbach (2022) have called for the study of such spaces within the context of Catholic education. Our study seeks to respond to this call by addressing the following research question: In what ways can participation in a racial affinity group support the sense of community experienced by Catholic school teachers of color?

Methods

In response, our research explored one racial affinity group for Catholic school teachers of color. In alignment with our critical, Catholic perspective and with previous research (e.g., Mosely, 2018), we structured our racial affinity group meetings as Freirian culture circles. Paulo Freire (1993) envisioned culture circles as opportunities for learners to engage one another in a dialogue, where they identify and interrogate inequities in their communities and then collectively craft and enact plans toward addressing those problems. In teacher education settings, culture circles typically consist of small groups of teachers, who follow a process called the “critical cycle” (Souto-Manning,

2010). At each gathering, one or two circle members name and describe a particular challenge, or dilemma, that they have recently encountered in their work as teachers and that relates to the theme of equity in schooling. Members then engage in semi-structured conversations about the dilemma: they discuss its underlying causes, then weigh potential approaches to address the dilemma and to work for greater equity in schools. Finally, when the circle reconvenes, members report and reflect on the responsive actions they took, naming new dilemmas that might have surfaced, thereby resuming in the critical cycle.

The culture circles at the center of this investigation took place within a practicum course that ran over three consecutive quarters and was embedded in a Catholic teacher induction program committed to Catholic, equity-oriented education. John taught the practicum course and used the first quarter to introduce the theory behind culture circles and to lead his students in practicing them, first with circles comprised of the entire class and later with small groups of students who took turns leading them themselves. At the end of the first quarter, John invited any students who identified as a teacher of color to join a culture circle designated solely for them, and five students (including Lisa) agreed to participate in this culture circle for teachers of color (see [Table 1](#)). During the second and third quarters of the practicum course (January through early June), these five teachers of color engaged in weekly culture circles. Prior to the start of these culture circles, John met with the five participants, explained the parameters of this research into culture circles as affinity spaces for teachers of color, and invited them to join the study; all five accepted the offer.

Table 1

Culture Circle Member Demographics

Name	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Languages Spoken	Teaching Experience	Teaching Position	Demographics of Employing School
Héctor	Male	Latino	Spanish & English	2.5 years	Middle School Spanish	99% Latinx; 100% on scholarship
Lisa	Female	Latina	Spanish & English	1.5 years	Middle School Math	99% Latinx; 100% on scholarship
Marie	Female	Latina	Spanish & English	1.5 years	Third Grade	70% Latinx, 30% AAPI; 85% on scholarship
Maritza	Female	Latina	Spanish & English	<1 year	Middle School English Language Arts	40% Latinx, 15% AAPI, 45% white; 30% on scholarship
Nique	Female	AAPI (Filipina)	Tagalog & English	1.5 years	Middle School English Language Arts	60% AAPI, 30% Latinx, 10% white; 25% on scholarship

The research collaborative (comprised of the five teachers and John) decided to adopt a critical research methodology (Morrell, 2009), so that our research approach aligned with both the theory undergirding culture circles and other research into racial affinity spaces for teachers (e.g., Mosely, 2018). Critical research methodology aims to create knowledge that advances justice by studying contextualized practices designed to address real world inequities (Souto-Manning, 2012). To do this, university-based and K-12 teachers collaborate as co-researchers in the knowledge-creation process (Pimenta, 2005). Co-researchers (or “members” of the research collaborative) engage in an inquiry process similar to Freire’s cycle of critical reflection: they collect data together, make sense of it by analyzing and dialogue about it, they co-construct findings and then connect them to their real-life implications (Souto-Manning, 2012). This involvement of university-based teachers and K-12 teachers allows for ideas to be examined by multiple perspectives, all of which are valuable because they represent stakeholders in the practice and context being studied (Morrell, 2009). A critical research methodology also centers voices that have been ignored or marginalized in more traditional research, specifically here teachers of color, and creates spaces for them to challenge conditions that may impede their vocational thriving (Pimenta, 2005).

Guided by this critical research tradition, we collected qualitative, ethnographic data throughout the study (see Table 2). Prior to engaging in culture circles, the research collaborative developed a protocol of questions for baseline interviews, and the teachers took turns interviewing each other individually around topics related to their experiences as Catholic educators of color. Each weekly culture circle that the teachers engaged in was audio recorded and transcribed. The teachers also wrote brief reflections immediately following every circle meeting to capture how they made sense of their dialogue that week. As part of a larger investigation into the impact of culture

Table 2

Data Collection Methods

Data Source	Record	Length
Individual baseline interviews with each participant	Audio-recorded and transcribed	19-38 minutes
Weekly culture circle meetings	Audio-recorded and transcribed	32-68 minutes
Culture circle reflections by each participant	Written (digitally submitted)	.5-2 pages
Semimonthly classroom observations of each teacher	Ethnographic fieldnotes	45-80 minutes
Debrief interviews following each classroom observation	Audio-recorded and transcribed	11-34 minutes
Individual comparative interviews with each participant	Audio-recorded and transcribed	24-40 minutes
Final/focus group interview with participants	Audio-recorded and transcribed	59 minutes

circles on classroom teaching, John also conducted semi-monthly teaching observations of each teacher and led them individually in post-observation conferences, which were audio recorded and transcribed. Following the last culture circle in late May, the research collaborative again co-crafted a protocol of questions for comparative interviews, which were used to individually question the teachers about how participation in culture circles impacted their identities, relationships, and professional learning. Finally, the research collaborative engaged in a whole-group discussion, where we dialogued about the culture circles and what they meant to the group collectively. These comparative and whole-group interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Overall, we collected a sizeable data corpus, totaling over 500 pages of interview transcripts, culture circle transcripts, observation notes, and written reflections.

Once data collection concluded, all members of the research collaborative were invited to engage in data analysis; we agreed to examine the data around the particular research question of this investigation. We engaged in a funneled, multistep approach to data analysis (Saldaña, 2015). First, we utilized a small set of broad inductive codes derived from the theoretical framework (e.g., “validation,” “cultural understanding”) to isolate and organize data into large categories that addressed the research question. In our second pass through the data, we continued processing initial categories, using deductive subcodes (e.g., “role models,” “translanguaging”) to further break down and make sense of the data. The third round of analysis consisted of comparing subcodes within and across categories to develop and refine our conjectures. At each stage of the analysis process, we met to establish interrater reliability by co-constructing and defining codes with examples. We then dialogued about our memos to collaboratively craft and refine conjectures into findings. Finally, we member-checked these findings with the other participants of the research collaborative and incorporated their feedback.

Findings

From this exploration of the data, we found that each member reported experiencing high degrees of solidarity, community, and belonging within their culture circles for teachers of color. For example, Marie commented in her comparative interview:

I feel so much closer and personal relationships with people from the circle. I feel like I can go to people from culture circles when I need help outside culture circles. I feel very comfortable. I feel very safe . . . I allow them to see all parts of me . . . This is a space where I can talk about the struggle that I’m having at work and I’m going to be affirmed and heard.

As Marie notes, members shared that they were able to establish close professional and personal relationships that allowed them to open up to one another, be vulnerable, find safety and comfort, and then express themselves more fully. Maritza echoed a similar sentiment:

I have appreciated building relationships because of the culture circles. Every time I leave culture circles, I feel heard, I feel solidarity . . . I usually find it hard to trust people and to connect with people. But I've built some really beautiful, meaningful relationships with everybody in the culture circle. I know that I can count on these people. I know that they understand where I'm coming from . . . There's just this feeling of connection and solidarity.

For Maritza, the culture circles fostered relationships of trust that were associated with solidarity, or the mutual recognition, care, and understanding of one another.

This sense of solidarity arose through the factors that [White and colleagues \(2023\)](#) noted in their theory on racial affinity groups: authenticity, cultural understanding, validation, and professional learning. However, these factors manifested to foster community in some distinct ways, likely related to the particular Catholic school contexts in which members of the culture circles worked.

Authenticity

Members felt that, through their conversations together in culture circles, they could more fully express, unpack, and explore their identities as Catholic school teachers of color. As seen in other studies of racial affinity groups for teachers of color (e.g., [Pour-Khashid, 2018](#)), the culture circles examined here allowed members opportunities to reflect on their intersectional identities by talking about issues of race, language, and gender, which were felt to be taboo in their schools. For Lisa, culture circles

allowed me to fully be myself, and I had never fully met myself [before culture circles].

And so I think that that was really beautiful – to have that space every week where I could unpack that slowly, what that meant to be a teacher of color and how I was presenting that.

Opportunities for “unpacking” their identities as teachers of color often arrived during discussions of professional dilemmas. For example, Maritza articulated a dilemma that involved her colleagues' deficit views of a student's linguistic background, which Maritza herself shared. Exploring this dilemma with the other members helped Maritza realize that through culture circle discussions:

...we slowly help each other break free from our biases and also from maybe past inequality that we've experienced growing up. Because vicariously, we're living through our students, and when things happen to our students who are also a makeup of different ethnicities and different cultures, we see ourselves through our students. And we can unpack their experiences and in a way that comes back to some of our traumas or healing or journeys.

In the sixth culture circle, another member related a dilemma, which involved a conflict with a male administrator and seemed to be mediated by race and gender. This member's discussion with others in the culture circle created space for her to analyze how those factors impacted who she was, how she was treated, and what course of actions she could later take at her school site. In examples such as these, culture circle discussions created occasions for members to articulate challenges at their school sites, explore how issues like race and culture mediated them, and then reflect on their own identities in relation to such issues.

Although less common in previous studies of racial affinity groups, the members of our culture circles reflected on being a teacher as a culturally mediated concept and one tied to a very specific Catholic school context. For members like Marie, discussions with other teachers of color helped them see more clearly how their views of teaching and being a teacher diverged from white norms in that "teachers in particular are revered in communities of color." Reflecting on this more respected understanding of the profession helped the culture circle members reposition and find greater value in their identities as teachers. For Lisa, who grew up thinking that "teaching is for white people," being with other teachers of color helped her "experience this moment of solidarity, like, whoa, there's other teachers here that look like me," which allowed her to more fully embrace the intersection between her ethnic background and her professional identity.

Participation in culture circles also gave members opportunities to analyze and express how they experienced the convergence of race, culture, and Catholicism as Catholic school teachers of color. Lisa shared in our group interview that, prior to her participation in culture circles, she saw her Catholic faith on the one hand and her ethnoracial identity on the other hand as "very separate and very distinct," despite having attended Catholic schools and universities for her entire education. Culture circle dialogues helped members like Lisa see how race, culture, and religion actually overlapped and interacted to shape who they were specifically as Catholic teachers of color. Marie commented on how rare – and yet necessary – this opportunity for self-reflection and self-expression is for Catholic school teachers of color:

I think that it is a beautiful thing to be a person of color. It's beautiful thing to be Catholic. But I still struggle to find spaces where I'm like, "Okay. When are we going to get to an area where we can have these conversations about both?" Right? Because then people think if I talk too much about race, then it's like that's more important than God. And it's like, that's not the conversation we're having. And I think it's hard to separate those two, because I don't want to separate them, but then you have to have the conversation.

As spaces for "the conversation," culture circles afforded members safety to discuss different elements of their identities – especially race and Catholicism – whose interactions have been

ignored or silenced, and thus created places for authenticity where, as Marie stated, “teachers of color can be teachers of color.”

Cultural Understanding

As [White and colleagues \(2023\)](#) proposed, our culture circles created community among teachers of color by acting as spaces of cultural understanding – spaces where members (a) discovered commonality and collectively engaged in diverse cultural practices and (b) could share with one another their racialized experiences as teachers in Catholic schools. Members shared that within the space of culture circles, they felt free to engage in multicultural and multilinguistic practices with one another, which contrasted from what many of them experienced in school sites, where they felt encumbered by white norms of professionalism. In particular, members like Marie noted how much they enjoyed speaking Spanish to one another during culture circles. Even members like Nique (who spoke English and Tagalog) noted how the cultural resonance experienced through shared language and practices bonded the whole group:

I loved all the translanguageing that would happen within [culture circles]. Even as the one Filipina in our group, sometimes you would speak in Spanish, and I’d be very happy. And I think that’s another kind of comfortability where there were words or things that we couldn’t explain in English, and then all you had to do was use the arsenal of the different languages that we all know and it would communicate exactly what we needed to know. And I don’t know if that would always be as well received or we’d feel as comfortable to do that in a [professional] space where there were white folks present.

In this way, culture circles allowed members a rare opportunity in teacher education for teachers of color to bond over cultural practices that they shared and/or that departed from more traditionally white norms.

As found in previous research on affinity spaces for teachers of color (e.g., [Mosely, 2018](#)), members of the culture circles shared challenges mediated by race and ethnicity, even in Catholic schools where the leadership and majority of faculty identify as educators of color. For Lisa, culture circle members grew closer to one another as they spoke more openly about the impact of race and gender on their experiences:

Being able to have a space where I can talk freely and not worry about the things that I’m saying when it comes to my background, has been really helpful in supporting me as a teacher of color in Catholic schools. And also just sharing that similar experience of struggle or pushback or laments when it comes to trying to advocate for yourself or your students and feeling like your voice isn’t being heard. Because you’re a teacher of color, it’s hard to

hear other [members] are also experiencing that, but also very unifying because you are suffering in that together. It's a lot of emotional and personal support.

Among the microaggressions experienced at their school sites, members repeatedly mentioned feeling that their competence was questioned by colleagues and/or administrators. This resulted in some members experiencing prolonged imposter syndrome, even after their first years of teaching, a finding common within the literature on racial affinity groups for teachers of color (e.g., [Kulkarni et al., 2022](#)). For example, Nique noted “having to earn respect rather than just having it automatically be given because of my identity” when she had previously worked at a predominantly white Catholic high school. In another instance, during the seventh culture circle meeting, Héctor raised a dilemma around his feelings of inadequacy as a teacher, sharing “I think that being Latino, I guess... There is a thing to prove. I always felt like that imposter syndrome of like, ‘Am I performing well?’” As the group discussed Héctor’s dilemma, members took opportunities to compliment his practice of culturally sustaining and caring teaching. Afterwards, Héctor later reflected:

I still second guess myself all the time. I don't know if this is a case for a lot of people of color who they have the imposter syndrome. I know it is for me, at least. But in the culture circles, I have a group that always affirms. They always start with a positive, “Oh, I like how he has done this and that.” And that's helpful because sometimes even the stuff that we do [well], we get undercut or we just don't value as much and question ourselves.

Culture circles not only gave Héctor space to share how race mediated his work, but it afforded opportunities for support and affirmation, which likely contributed to members’ experience of solidarity.

As seen in other studies of affinity groups for teachers of color (e.g., [Kohli et al., 2021](#)), discussions of race-mediated dilemmas extended beyond the teachers’ own identities and delved into challenges that their minoritized students faced in classrooms, particularly around deficit orientations of colleagues or expectations for standardized curriculum. In one of the dilemmas she presented during a culture circle meeting, Marie described her struggle to more effectively support an emergent bilingual student, whose literacy development had been undervalued by previous teachers at her school. Marie later received advice from members about how to more fully leverage this student’s language assets for further learning and also how to more effectively advocate for him, and she reflected:

I did struggle a lot [at my school] when I was trying to bring in other factors about the student, like, “Have we considered the language at home? Have we considered that as a factor in maybe why they're struggling with this writing activity?” Being in culture circles with all teachers of color who speak other languages at home, that's not even something that I have to say because it's like we all get it. I don't have to be the intruder who says,

“Wait, let’s have this side conversation about language accessibility.” Because that’s been a struggle when I was in white spaces.

A critical distinction of the culture circle discussions studied here and affinity groups found in previous research was how members shared racialized challenges that intersected with their Catholic school contexts. Members such as Marie and Nique shared racialized challenges involving the same Catholic-specific environments: As previous studies have indicated (e.g., [Bryk, 1996](#)), members appreciated the call toward community within their schools – the expectation to build relationships with students, colleagues, administration and parents and the emphasis on finding commonality in the practice of their Catholic faith. Yet, as Nique notes below, when the call toward community became one of “unity” under whiteness, members felt discouraged from sharing their experiences of racism, reflecting on their racialized identities, and/or expressing cultural and linguistic practices that departed from white norms:

I think there’s a flip side as well that is still festering in Catholic communities, where because we are Catholics, we are expected to just ignore the fact that we are different and talk more about like, “Oh. We’re united. We’re one.” Right? The one holy Catholic Apostolic Church. The oneness being that sameness. And I get that from the people that I work with: “We shouldn’t be talking necessarily about our diversity, because God created us all equal, so it doesn’t matter.” I get that from other Catholic white spaces as well, of like, “We shouldn’t have to talk about how we’re different.”

Through culture circles, members discussed and bonded over this unique tension in Catholic schools – how to pursue communal Christo-centric relationships within a context that does not always recognize ethnoracial and cultural distinctions among school members, nor does it see the marginalization that results from a lack of inclusion.

Professional Development

As theory on teacher affinity groups predicted ([White et al., 2023](#)), the members of this study reported growing more closely to one another through shared opportunities of professional development within the culture circles. As Marie notes below, members presented challenges around and shared with each other ways to more effectively engage and scaffold the learning of their students, especially those who were culturally and linguistically diverse and/or who showed exceptional learning needs.

From culture circles, I learned so much, very practical things, such as how to use graphic organizers appropriately with emergent bilingual students, how to use my universal access time to give differentiated instruction, how to form small groups.

While much of the learning in culture circles focused on practical pedagogical approaches, members developed in other facets of their roles as teachers of color in Catholic schools. In particular, members like Lisa shared how they “learned practical tips of how to navigate being a teacher of color in predominantly white spaces,” for example, by finding allies among staff and faculty, creating opportunities for self-care, and carefully questioning power when it threatens diverse students. Members also reported developing in their approach toward critical reflection, as Maritza describes:

I think culture circles really impacted my reflection of my teaching because when challenges arise, I have learned some really critical tools in culture circles where I’m able to identify, is this a ‘me problem’ or is there really a challenge in my classroom and how can I help? Or how can I call in other supports to help me?

While previous literature on teacher affinity groups notes similar affordances in professional development (e.g., [Kohli, 2019](#)), we found that teachers in culture circles also reported growing in their dispositions as asset-oriented teachers – teachers who seek to look for, leverage, and build on the assets students bring to class and who seek to grow in their own teaching instead of blaming students when problems arise ([Beltramo et al., 2022](#); [Stillman & Beltramo, 2019](#)). Héctor, for example, found that sharing dilemmas within the culture circle gave him an opportunity to practice this disposition by more intentionally reflecting on student strengths after sharing a problem, and then leveraging such strengths to undertake a more effective pedagogical strategy:

I think that’s where the conversations in the culture circle help me reflect, like, “Okay, there has to be other strengths for this student.” There’s areas of growth for a student, yes, but maybe when he’s maybe working towards a problem, I can start to see, “Oh, he does know. Let’s start with what he knows and instead of what he doesn’t know.”

Members also reported that their professional development through culture circles was fundamentally collaborative because it arose through dialogue each week, and we surmise that the collaborative nature of learning and growing through culture circles strongly impacted members’ relationships and experiences of community with one another.

Validation

[White and colleagues \(2023\)](#) proposed that the last factor impacting the formation of community among affinity groups for teachers of color is the validation that participants feel when their articulated experiences are heard, believed, and affirmed by one another. In our study, we found this kind of validation among the members of the culture circles, as Marie noted:

The big thing that stands out to me is the affirmation we give to each other and for each other and with each other, when we do our culture circles. That's something I really felt was missing from [other professional settings] that I participated in, where it used to be, "Oh, you're doing such a good job, don't worry about this dilemma," which is a superficial affirmation. Versus, here it's a very deep, genuine, to the core, affirmation of who someone is. "I see you, I see the struggles that you're going through, and here are resources and tools to support you."

Without exception, after each member presented a dilemma within the culture circle, multiple other members validated that person's experience by thanking them for being vulnerable and sharing their struggles with the group, recognizing the positive work already undertaken by the presenter, and/or briefly relating the dilemma to their own previous experiences.

In their comparative interviews, however, members of this study expressed an even more expansive version of validation than that articulated in [White and colleague's \(2023\)](#) theory. Members expressed admiration for one another and often used the term "role model" to describe how they viewed one another. When asked to unpack this term, members pointed to the crucial importance of representation: Culture circles gave them an opportunity to see other folks of color working successfully as teachers and took inspiration and "hope" from this, as Maritza notes:

Seeing people who look like me, be professional people in the world, gives me hope on the days where my character is being challenged as a professional at work. Because whether the world's ready or not, people that look like us are going to continue to be successful and be role models for students of color and students who need recognition.

Members felt that their affective regard for one another was not simply based on shared ethnoracial identities, but also anchored in a "like-mindedness," recognition that they shared professional values and practices, such as an asset orientation toward students and families of color, the practice of critical self-reflection, a commitment to equity, and a deep faith in Christ. As Marie commented, "we're all here for our students and we're here [to give] love and support to every single teacher in our culture circle." This like-mindedness in turn cultivated a sense of faith (or "trust") among the members, like Nique, who shared:

I deeply trust this particular group of teachers of color in our circle right now . . . I know they would never assume or think or say something bad that about the families that we serve and the community that we are a part of . . . And that they won't judge me for mistakes that I make, especially when I name them in a dilemma and say, "What can I do about this?"

Thus, far beyond simple validation, members such as Nique reported that such experiences of hope, like-mindedness, and trust supported a strong community of love, learning, and acceptance:

I learn so well from my peers [in culture circles] because they know and love me so well . . .
It's a space of genuine acceptance and wanting to help people work through things.

Discussion & Conclusion

In relation to our research question, we have found that members of this culture circle experienced close solidarity for reasons that previous theory and literature on teacher affinity groups have suggested (e.g., [White et al., 2023](#)): They had opportunities to experience authenticity together, reflecting and more freely expressing their identities as teachers of color ([Pour-Khashid, 2018](#)). Members reported experiences of cultural understanding with one another as they participated in similar cultural and linguistic practices together and as they shared common challenges as teachers of color navigating white spaces at their school sites ([Stovall & Mosely, 2023](#)). Members also collaboratively learned from one another, in both their pedagogy and their professional reflection ([Kohli, 2019](#)), and they reported feelings of validation when members listened, affirmed, and supportively responded to each other's experiences in schools ([White et al., 2023](#)).

However, members also grew in relationship with one another through context-specific ways: they collaboratively reflected on the particulars of Catholic and racial identities, they expressed specific tensions that grew out of the Catholic school's calling toward community, they grew in their dispositions toward recognizing their students' humanity through an asset orientation, and they developed like-mindedness, trust, and personal regard in their culture circle. Taken together, these findings suggest that racial affinity groups in Catholic school settings not only reflect similar promise of such spaces in a context of public schooling, but they might also point to additional affordances for community-building that are specific to Catholic contexts and that deserve further study.

In particular, we propose that racial affinity groups for Catholic school teachers have the potential to act as Paschal spaces of healing – spaces where teachers of color could compassionately share in their sufferings, could put away their former, often dejected and questioned professional identities, and find transformation through growth and solidarity. Such Paschal spaces could later bring about a fuller experience of the Incarnation and Trinity: Members could leverage this growth and solidarity toward fuller recognition of human dignity for themselves (and their students of color) and toward greater inclusion in Christian community, first among one another, and then potentially in their wider school communities.

We consider how Freire's theory of a critical learning community could help explain how the elements of authenticity, cultural understanding, professional development, and validation may

result in such powerful experiences of community for teachers of color, who have generally found marginalization in K-12 schooling (Bettini et al., 2022). The structure of culture circles gave members regular opportunities to dialogue and critically reflect on the dilemmas that mediate their work, which ranged from the more mundane, practical and expected challenges of pedagogy to more intense and deleterious instances of microaggressions and racialized tensions of school community. Through these moments of problem-posing and collaborative solutions, members found inspiration and hope in the pedagogical strategies they shared, their faith and trust in each other solidified when vulnerability was met with affirmation, and they grew in affection – even love – for one another as likeminded companions in vocation. These elements of dialogue, hope, faith, and love make sense as powerful community-building foundations particularly for teachers of color working in Catholic settings because they echo and anchor so much of the Church’s guidance, from its catechesis to its documents on Catholic schooling, to the ancient epistles of St. Paul. We suspect that teachers like the members of this study desire such elements as much as any member of the wider Church needs them to feel like they more fully belong in the body of Christ.

Given that our study examined one relatively small racial affinity group in a particular context, we caution against drawing broad generalizations from it and instead call for further research in this area. More specifically, we note that the racial affinity groups examined here took place outside of a K-12 school setting, through a Catholic teacher development program situated within higher education. As increasingly more public school districts intentionally build racial affinity spaces for their teachers of color (e.g., Shah et al., 2022), we wonder what it would take and look like for a Catholic school, deanery, or diocese to create such a space. Additionally, we wonder how alumni of color from a Catholic teacher education program (or those from multiple programs) might support one another through virtual racial affinity groups that span geographical regions.

If study and/or enactment of future racial affinity groups for Catholic school teachers were to proceed, however, we anticipate that educational researchers and leaders might encounter objections to these spaces similar to those voiced in the wider discourse on U.S. education (e.g., Blevins, 2024; Hess, 2021), namely, worry that the cohesion of Catholic school communities could be fractured by imposition of racial affinity groups as a form of neo-segregation, essentially instigating racialized tensions where they do not currently exist. Given the seriousness of these concerns, we conclude our paper with some questions and thoughts for consideration.

We acknowledge that many Catholic school members do experience a strong sense of community already in place at their school sites and could thereby reasonably conclude that racial affinity spaces would not be necessary or even beneficial for their schools. To such stakeholders, we propose questions for critical reflection: Do other educators, specifically teachers of color at your school sites, feel welcome to authentically express, reflect on and discuss their racialized professional identities on campus? Are they heard and affirmed when they raise experiences of racism or inequities for students of color? Are they afforded opportunities to grow in relation to

these challenges, and are those challenges and experiences validated and addressed by others in the school community? We contend that, if the answer to any of these questions were uncertain or in the negative, then perhaps the strength of relationships and community (even though experienced generally) may not be shared by all members of one's school and in this case, some dialogue – in the form of racial affinity groups or some other approach – might be useful in addressing this question of shared communal experiences.

We also note how the research demonstrates – in both public and Catholic sectors – that racism, inequity, and the marginalization of teachers and students of color already exist in many of our schools (e.g., [Bettini et al., 2022](#); [Felix, 2022](#)). We echo the [USCCB's \(2018\)](#) call that the time for recognizing and irradicating racism within our Church and wider society has already arrived. Thus, rather than instigating heretofore unknown racialized tensions in Catholic schools, we suggest spaces of intentional support for teachers of color, such as racial affinity groups, might offer an opportunity for Catholic education to find out where racism insidiously hides, take action against it, and more fully live out Christ's calling toward radical love, transformation, and communion with God and each other.

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