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# THE ROLE OF RESEARCH IN CATHOLIC EDUCATION

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Vatican II describes the role of the Catholic educator in these profound terms: “Beautiful indeed and of great importance is the vocation of all those who aid parents in fulfilling their duties, and who, as representatives of the human community, undertake the task of education in Catholic schools. This vocation demands special qualities of mind and heart, very careful preparation, and continuing readiness to renew and adapt” (Vatican II Council, 1965, p. 5). No factor has a greater impact on the attainment of the mission of Catholic education than the characteristics of the educators involved in this ministry in schools, in parish programs, and in diocesan offices. No challenge is more significant than the spiritual and professional formation of the current and future generations of Catholic educators.

These realities provide the framework for addressing these questions: (1) what research currently affects policy and practice in Catholic schools and (2) what research is needed for future development. The answers are to be found in examining what makes Catholic schools effective and what adaptations Catholic educators need to make to continue to be effective.

Unfortunately, the answer to the first question, what research is currently used to inform policy-making and practice, is “very little.” This situation needs to be remedied in light of the current focus on action research as a primary professional development activity and the current emphasis on data-driven school improvement processes.

Reading, let alone reflecting on, research is considered an impossibility by many practitioners in light of the time constraints created by the daily demands of their positions. However, even if more time were available, a substantial body of research addressing practitioner needs and concerns specifically related to Catholic education does not exist. Further, for research to be of practical value to the practitioner, it would need to be readily acces-

sible in summary format. An example would be a synthesis of the findings of dissertations written on topics related to Catholic schools.

Many administrators of Catholic education are familiar with the key research works that attest to the effectiveness of Catholic schools. These works include Coleman and Hoffer's findings regarding the "social capital" and "functional community" of Catholic schools; Chubb and Moe's conclusions regarding the climate of collegiality and empowerment in Catholic schools; the Rand study's focus on clarity of mission and local ownership by educators, students, and parents; and Bryk, Lee, and Holland's emphasis on Catholic schools as "voluntary communities." Likewise, there is a familiarity with a variety of studies that provide specific data on the academic achievement of Catholic school students. Most notable are the studies based on three national databases: High School and Beyond; the National Assessment of Educational Progress; and the National Education Longitudinal Study. Finally, practitioners are aware of Greeley, McCready, and McCourt's research and of NCEA's research report, *The Heart of the Matter*, that demonstrated the positive effects of attending a Catholic school on adult practice of one's faith.

Much of the credit for practitioners' familiarity with the above-mentioned research is owed to the National Catholic Educational Association's (NCEA) publication of research summaries prepared by John Convey in numerous issues of *NCEA Notes*. Likewise, articles written by Peter Benson and others, published in NCEA's *Momentum*, also provide the practitioner with summaries of the research on academic achievement and religious effects. In the past year, the popular media, including *Newsweek*, *U. S. News and World Report*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *CBS Evening News*, and *Good Morning America*, have given a significant amount of attention to studies which highlight the effectiveness of Catholic schools.

However, familiarity with the research findings does not automatically translate into using research to inform policy and practice. In the case of the research described above, these studies serve to affirm the work that Catholic schools are doing, and practitioners value that affirmation. Still, these studies describe practices that are already in place in Catholic schools, and thus they reinforce policy and practice but do not shape new policy or practice.

Then, what research does shape policy and practice? At the building level, practitioners are most familiar with educational research regarding instruction and student achievement primarily from the public sector. For example, research on ability grouping has led to efforts to "detrack" in some schools; research on middle schools has stimulated restructuring of a number of K-8 schools to include a "middle school" at the upper grades; research on how the brain learns has promoted the use of new instructional methods. However, little research specifically conducted with Catholic schools exists on these and similar topics. Generalizability to Catholic schools is assumed

and is probably valid. However, replicated research would be desirable.

At the diocesan level, local research is often used to inform policy and practice. Some examples include the demographic research used to help shape decisions about school openings, closings, and consolidations; the evaluations of projects funded by grants; and the market research utilized in development and recruitment endeavors.

The opening point of this essay speaks of the unique importance of Catholic educators, and there is a significant need for more research on their formation. Two primary works exist: NCEA's research study, "Sharing the Faith: The Beliefs and Values of Catholic High School Teachers," which is already 12 years old; and Tarr, Ciriello, and Convey's study entitled "Commitment and Satisfaction Among Parochial School Teachers," which is more recent.

Key among the research needed is study on effective models of initial and on-going formation of Catholic educators in the ministries of teaching and administration. Diocesan offices and individual schools are engaged in a continual quest to find effective ways of forming the current and next generation of lay teachers and lay administrators.

Many lay personnel had their initial experiences as Catholic educators in settings with a large number of priests and religious. Now, large numbers of people entering Catholic education are graduates of non-Catholic institutions of higher education, and they enter schools which are completely or almost completely staffed by lay people. These circumstances make research on effective methods of formation for ministry a serious need.

Forming leaders for Catholic education at the school and diocesan level is likewise a major challenge. Research is needed to clarify the aspects of administration which are unique in a Catholic school or a Catholic school system. Such research is needed for Catholic institutions of higher education to respond appropriately to the need to train prospective principals in the theory and skills of educational administration and to assist in forming them as ministers to the local Church. A sense of vocation permeates all aspects of administration in a Catholic school or system. All those involved in preparing future administrators need an understanding of how Catholic school administration is different from administration in a public, nondenominational, or non-Catholic religious school. These differences are holistic, affecting every action and every decision, not just the obvious areas of law or finance. Research to clarify the unique role of the Catholic education administrator would be a valuable gift to the Church, to Catholic institutions of higher education, and to those who will serve in these positions.

There are a number of research projects which would be valuable in addition to the two key items of research described above; namely, research on effective initial and ongoing formation and research on the unique role of the Catholic education administrator. A number of these topics are listed below:

- descriptions of Catholic school “systems” from the perspectives of Church structure, organizational theory, and educational theory
- models of effective governance structures
- research on what factors contribute to a positive school climate and how these factors align with the Catholic philosophy of education
- descriptions of what constitutes Catholic identity and how to achieve that identity in an elementary or secondary school
- research regarding what is effective in fostering parental valuing of the religious dimension of Catholic education
- models of Christian service programs
- models of religious formation of students at various developmental levels
- models of addressing students’ special learning needs
- replication of key research on instruction in the Catholic school setting
- research designs on topics which can be replicated by dioceses and schools in line with the current emphases on action research and reflective practice.

Catholic schools, and particularly the educators who teach in them and administer them, are indeed a gift to the Church, both the local Church and the universal Church. Additional and continued valid and reliable research on the unique aspects of the ministry of Catholic education will be an important factor in ensuring the continued vitality of this gift in the 21st century.

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