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# THE CATHOLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM: ELEMENTS OF COHERENCE

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*This study investigates those characteristics of the written curricula for selected diocesan elementary schools that distinguish the curricula as uniquely Catholic. Findings from the study indicate the presence of three values that serve as common themes: 1) acquiring Catholic faith knowledge; 2) engaging in Catholic faith practices; and 3) recognizing from a holistic perspective the multiple needs of students. The different approaches or "looks" of the curricula examined represent a variety of curriculum development approaches on a continuum of centralization/decentralization.*

Catholic schools have a mission common to all schools, public and private. They also have a unique purpose congruent with their role as an extension of the Church's educational function: to help students synthesize faith and culture and faith and life. Considering the school's unique reason for being, it is reasonable to assume that the written curricula for diocesan elementary schools reflect an emphasis on this unique purpose. In this study, the researcher sought to test this assumption and to address the questions: (1) are the written curricula developed for diocesan elementary schools coherent with the mission of Catholic education? and, (2) if so, in what ways are they coherent?

## PARTICIPANTS AND METHODOLOGY

In addressing these questions, the researcher conducted a study of the written curricula of 19 dioceses located throughout the United States (see Figure 1). Several of these dioceses are among the largest in the country.

Diocese of Arlington  
 Archdiocese of Baltimore  
 Archdiocese of Boston  
 Archdiocese of Chicago  
 Archdiocese of Cincinnati  
 Diocese of Cleveland  
 Archdiocese of Kansas City  
 Archdiocese of Newark  
 Archdiocese of New Orleans  
 Archdiocese of New York  
 Archdiocese of Philadelphia  
 Diocese of Phoenix  
 Diocese of Providence  
 Diocese of Rockville Centre  
 Archdiocese of Saint Louis  
 Archdiocese of Seattle  
 Diocese of Toledo  
 Diocese of Tulsa  
 Archdiocese of Washington

**Figure 1. Participant Dioceses**

In gathering data, the researcher first sent an introductory letter to 32 dioceses requesting copies of their curriculum documents. Of the dioceses contacted, 14 provided the complete set of curriculum materials they had developed. One diocese made its total curriculum available on computer disk. Due to the size of their documents, several dioceses were unable to send a complete set of materials; they did, however, provide copies of the table of contents for each curriculum area along with summaries of the materials developed. Thirteen dioceses were unable to participate, typically because their curricula were under revision.

When the requested materials were received from a diocese, the researcher checked to determine if the documents addressed the core content areas, that is, reading, language arts, math, science, social studies, and religion. A check was then completed to ascertain if the documents included emphases on the areas of music, art, computer/technology, and physical education.

In reviewing the written curricula the researcher's main focus was to review the documents for evidence of Catholicity. Typically, data with respect to Catholic identity were sought by examining the statements of philosophy as well as the objectives for each subject area. After analyzing each document, the researcher then returned to the document a second time to retrieve ideas that may have been overlooked during the initial reading and to check ideas that may have surfaced while examining documents in other program areas. Diocesan staff were called or visited to obtain clarification

whenever such was needed.

Given the nature of the study and the relatively small number of documents included for examination, effort was made to triangulate the data toward assuring an accurate analysis. Data were assessed against the contents of NCEA curriculum documents, the findings of research on Catholic schools, and the experience of Catholic school educators.

## **CURRICULUM AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT: BACKGROUND DEFINITIONS**

Before addressing the research questions identified for study, it is important to define the concept “curriculum” as well as the different approaches taken within different dioceses to the curriculum development process. The way in which the terms are defined gives direction at a later point to the interpretation of the data collected.

### **CURRICULUM**

Glatthorn (1995) defines curriculum from six perspectives. First is the *recommended* curriculum constructed by experts in the field. Second is the *written* curriculum which directs teachers about what content to teach. Third is the *taught* curriculum, the curriculum actually instructed by teachers within the classroom. A fourth perspective that has become increasingly politically important is the *tested* curriculum. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and the National Science Teachers Association are examples of groups exerting strong influence for the provision of a recommended set of standards intended to affect the written and tested curriculum. The proliferation of state competency tests increases the pressure on teachers to focus on the tested curriculum. Glatthorn identifies the *supported* curriculum as the fifth form. This is the curriculum provided within textbooks, software, and other educational resources. The inclusion of so-called teacher-proof textbooks and resource materials subtly but strongly influences what is taught. And finally, what is acknowledged as the most important curriculum, the *learned* curriculum, is the actual knowledge base acquired by a student in school.

This study is limited in focus to the written curriculum. A more complete study would include all the perspectives noted by Glatthorn.

### **THE CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT PROCESS**

Curriculum development processes are of basically two types: centralized/formal and decentralized/suggestive. These types represent hypothetical ends of a continuum, and most dioceses employ processes that fall on a continuum at a point between the two extremes. The process employed by

a given diocese generally favors one orientation or the other. At times, the selected approach displays characteristics of each.

The centralized/formal process provides a clear prescriptive direction to individual schools on what is to be taught. In the development process teacher representatives from throughout a diocese as well as central office staff are involved and the substance of the developed documents is clearly directional. Performance objectives are specified for each curricular area, and teaching is viewed as a technical function designed to produce results. The centralized approach minimizes the possibility of discrepancy or misunderstanding between the written and the taught curriculum. It also signals an effort to assure the presence of uniform high standards in all schools. An excellent example of the application of a centralized approach is found in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia.

In the decentralized/suggestive approach, the diocese recommends guidelines for local implementation. Written curricula then emerge from the local school through the process described within those guidelines. The Archdiocese of Chicago provides an excellent example of the decentralized approach. Curriculum documents generated through the decentralized approach have a local flavor with programs designed to meet the needs of a school's clientele and to satisfy local requirements.

As earlier noted, dioceses sometimes apply a process representative of both positions. Even a diocese with a detailed, centralized curriculum may emphasize the need for local schools to implement curriculum standards by applying the most appropriate means (Diocese of Tulsa). The approach selected for use by a diocese simply reflects a philosophical orientation. There is no research on Catholic schools to substantiate the effectiveness of one approach over another.

Irrespective of the approach taken by a diocese to the curriculum development process, there are substantive underpinnings that underlie the program development process. The key component giving direction to the written Catholic elementary school curriculum is the educational philosophy which shapes it. That philosophy states what the school values, what its purposes are; and how it intends to accomplish these purposes. With the different perspectives on the concepts curriculum and the curriculum development process serving as background, study findings are now reported.

## **IS THE CATHOLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM COHERENT WITH THE MISSION OF CATHOLIC EDUCATION?**

The term "coherent" describes a curriculum held together by a large, common purpose (Beane, 1995). For the Catholic elementary school, the large purpose is the mission of faith formation within its students (National

Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1973). Theoretically each segment of the curriculum contributes to reaching this goal. The obvious implication of the principle of coherence is that it should be possible to find evidence of Catholicity within all areas of the curriculum.

As earlier noted, philosophy and curriculum connect in important ways, and a school's philosophy determines the primary orientation of the curriculum. The curriculum documents examined in this study demonstrate consistent philosophical themes. These themes typically appear in the introduction to the curriculum document for each content area.

The more clearly curriculum developers articulate the Catholic school philosophy as it relates to a content area, the more clearly the curriculum's stated objectives are likely to be consistent with that philosophy. For example, the language arts curriculum of the Diocese of Cleveland states:

The communication of the gospel message by word and witness is central in Catholic education. A Graded Course of Study in Language Arts makes a unique and important contribution to the attaining of these goals of Catholic education. This philosophy envisions our schools motivating students to grow academically, culturally and socially in an atmosphere "designed to celebrate and practice love of God and neighbor." (1993, p. 8)

The curriculum document goes on to state more explicitly the goals of the study of language arts:

The Graded Course of Study in Language Arts endeavors to attain the goals of Catholic education by forming Christians who:

- work cooperatively in a spirit of mutual service
  - cultivate their intellectual growth and determine their aesthetic standards
  - appreciate and enjoy a constantly widening scope of literature and the language in which it is communicated
  - become aware of important historical and literary elements of our cultural heritage
  - relate the ideas, feelings and experiences derived from literature and communicate them effectively to others
  - use knowledge gained from reading to make sound judgments based on Christian principles
  - realize that the effective and responsible use of the English language is crucial to becoming a Catholic influence in contemporary social justice and moral issues
  - are encouraged to broaden their reading interests
  - make choices in leisure reading and viewing activities grounded in literary discretion and moral judgments
  - possess the tools of language necessary for critical evaluation of media, propaganda, news and advertisements
  - integrate and apply language arts activities to all aspects of the curriculum.
- (Diocese of Cleveland, 1993, p. 9)

The connections drawn between Catholic faith practice and the objectives for the area are quite clear.

Most diocesan curricula reflect extensive efforts to articulate the Catholic school's mission. The integration of the mission into content area curricula then becomes an explicit effort to communicate the fundamental Catholic nature of the elementary school. Perhaps more importantly, this integration states clearly that faith formation is not an activity isolated within religious education classes.

The curriculum developed by the Archdiocese of Kansas City provides an excellent integration of Catholic faith practice with different subjects. The elements of their math curriculum, as cited in the following section, for example, reflect the integration of the fundamental concepts which define our Catholicity into the teaching of mathematics. The diocese follows this approach in all subject areas.

#### **CONCEPT: DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON**

The Dignity of the Human Person calls us to reason and problem solve.

##### **TOPIC #**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 | Problem Solving                           |
| 4 | Estimation and Reasoning                  |
| 7 | Data Analysis, Probability and Statistics |
| 8 | Patterns, Relationships and Functions     |
| 9 | Algebra                                   |

#### **CONCEPT: CALL TO A SPECIFIC HISTORY**

The value of mathematics calls us to understand the roots in its history and gives shape to the present and the future. Math throughout history has affected human development, and will continue to do so in the future.

##### **TOPIC #**

- |   |                            |
|---|----------------------------|
| 5 | Measurement                |
| 6 | Geometry and Spatial Sense |

#### **CONCEPT: CALL TO LIFE IN A COMMUNITY**

We are called to become confident in our own unique abilities, and to share these abilities with our community.

##### **TOPIC #**

- |    |   |
|----|---|
| 2  | Math as Number Sense, Numeration, Number Systems, and Number Theory |
| 3  | Relationships, Computations, Operations                             |
| 10 | Communication (Archdiocese of Kansas City, 1996)                    |

An analysis of the written elementary school curricula of the 19 dioceses involved in this study reveals the presence of several common commitments reflective of the Catholic school philosophy. First, Catholic schools describe themselves as transmitters of faith knowledge. All religious education cur-

ricula incorporate instructional objectives that require knowledge of the tenets of Catholic faith. This knowledge base rests in scripture, Church documents, and tradition. An example of the key concepts of a religious education curriculum is seen in the following excerpt from the Archdiocese of Kansas City's document.

### **KEY UNIFYING CONCEPTS IN RELIGION**

*Concepts which mark the tradition of theological statements of papal, episcopal, and scriptural writings that direct religious education are:*

#### **1. Presence of God**

God is the author and creator of all life. God took the form of human in the person of Jesus Christ. The Spirit of God permeates all we are and all that we are called to do. In accepting the mystery of the Trinity, Catholics believe that God is transcendent as well as incarnate.

#### **2. Dignity of the Human Person**

The human person is the clearest reflection of the presence of God in the world. Each person is a reflection of God. Each person is an expression of the creation of God and the meaning of the redemptive ministry of Jesus Christ. Every human life is sacred.

#### **3. Call to Life in Community**

Each person is called to live in and build a faith community: in the home, in school, in parish, in their neighborhoods, in the workplace, in society, indeed in the world. While each person is a unique gift from God, people are called to work together to strengthen their faith life and live that life in harmony with their brothers and sisters.

#### **4. Reverence and Stewardship of the Planet**

All of life is sacred. Catholic Christians believe that we are one with all of creation. We are called to revere and protect nature and natural life. As people grow in awareness of the causes and effects on ecosystems, Catholics are called to promote life forms and to confront the forces of evil which threaten the preservation of those forms.

#### **5. Call to a Specific History**

Each person is born into a particular historical period — in their families, in the church and in the world. The present context has roots in a history of the past which gave shape to the present. Knowledge of history and traditions help shape future life and work to continue building the reign of God.

*These concepts provide the framework for determining all knowledge, values, skills, and experiences in the present and future lives of students. Each religion unit and course connects to one or more of these basic concepts. (Archdiocese of Kansas City, 1996, p. 1)*

A second important feature of the documents is that these key concepts are integrated within all content areas. The focus of the student's relationship with God throughout the entire educational experience defines a comprehensive approach to faith formation.

Third, the Catholic school creates an environment that promotes the nurturing of the faith and its practice. During school liturgical services students perform leadership roles that prepare them for adult ministry. The Catholic school community also bridges the student's transition into adult participation in the parish community. Samples of community-building activities for students may include their becoming pen pals for senior citizens or primary students, reading the parish bulletin to look for an activity to join, or collecting clothing for a needy family. These activities promote an emphasis on the development of a faith learning community, including parents and parishioners, that assists faith formation. Within the context of the Catholic school, students learn that the lived faith is not only a vertical relationship with God but a horizontal relationship with all members of their community.

Fourth, Catholic schools take a holistic approach to education. The following quote from the Visual Arts Philosophy of the Diocese of Phoenix (1995) states this perspective: "We believe Art Education is the means to develop the whole person by promoting the spiritual, moral, physical, creative and intellectual development of each student" (p. 8). The needs of the student beyond academic achievement require service and support, and recognition of this need is clear among the dioceses participating in this study. Catholic schools offer extracurricular programs, before- and after-school child care, and parent education programs; they recognize the student as a child with multiple needs and make an effort to provide appropriate services. Students are valued in their individuality with an emphasis on their creation in the image and likeness of God.

These holistic values reappear in each diocesan curriculum with little variation in language or meaning. The curriculum guide from the Archdiocese of Cincinnati (1994) states, for example, that "Catholic schools strive to educate the whole person by promoting the spiritual, moral, physical, and intellectual development of each student in a value centered environment." Documents from the Diocese of Cleveland (1993) convey the same message in a somewhat different manner. The diocese's philosophy of education statement reads, "...affirmed, treasured, and supported by the loving witnesses of Christian faith communities, the child continues a lifelong response to God's love by growing and excelling through responsible involvement in the academic, cultural, and civic concerns of daily life."

An opportunity to learn faith knowledge, a community where students live the faith, and a holistic approach that helps shape the student are three common threads found in Catholic elementary school philosophies. These three shared philosophical beliefs characterize the written curricula of

Catholic elementary schools even where their programs otherwise differ, and differ they do.

While all Catholic schools address the curricular areas common to all private and public schools such as reading, mathematics, and science, some Catholic schools emphasize a “back to basics” orientation, while others may stress “technological skills and knowledge” as integrating features of the curriculum. The technologically oriented skills approach has become especially popular as an integrating theme (Ross, Bondy, & Kyle, 1993). In fact, several states have adopted it as an integral part of a curriculum framework. Data collected from this study indicate, however, that even where technology is an important curriculum orientation, Catholic elementary schools consistently infuse religious values in this area as well as in all other areas of the curriculum. In essence, curriculum documents that provide direction to diocesan elementary schools universally indicate a commitment to balancing contemporary curricular orientations with distinctly Catholic values.

## WHAT QUESTIONS REMAIN?

The process for developing the Catholic school curriculum is highly centralized in some instances, decentralized in others, and under review in still others. In any case, those who engage in curriculum writing at the diocesan level have the advantage of building upon the work completed by others (Kealey, 1985). For example, the Archdiocese of New Orleans credits the Archdiocese of Cincinnati for its help in developing its curriculum guides.

The curricula for diocesan Catholic elementary schools universally reflect efforts to integrate a faith formation orientation within the instructional goals and objectives of all curriculum areas. The extent to which these efforts succeed is sometimes difficult to identify. To research the Catholic elementary school curriculum fully, one needs to investigate more than the written curriculum; one must also examine the messages students learn implicitly within the school (Eisner, 1985). The inability to capture the implicit dimension of the Catholic elementary school’s mission is a limitation of this study.

Because the research portrait of life in Catholic schools is less than complete and not all types of curriculum in Catholic schools have been adequately studied, some critics are still able to contend that there is nothing special going on within Catholic schools except high academic expectations and strict discipline. Fortunately, there is no shortage of public school reformers who recognize the uniqueness of the Catholic school mission and its effect on the environment of the school (Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990; Jackson, Boostrom, & Hansen, 1993; Sergiovanni, 1994). These reformers recognize the impact of the implicit curriculum on student, teacher, and community relationships.

Catholic school teachers emerge as critical players in the Catholic elementary school curriculum-instruction-learning equation. The teacher's ability to make the written curriculum a living document requires an understanding of teaching that goes beyond the stated curricular objectives. Teaching within the Catholic elementary school is special and unique as a faith teaching experience. The effective teacher brings gospel values into all areas of classroom life, and this implicit faith formation curriculum of the Catholic school is powerful. Those who teach within Catholic schools understand and appreciate their influence on students; they also acknowledge that other interactions within the school have a profound effect on student learning.

A host of important questions about the Catholic elementary curriculum require further research. The quality of teaching that is essential to transform the written curriculum into the learned, the impact of teachers modeling their Catholic faith, the extent to which Catholic values are alive within the classroom, and the influence of the Catholic school upon the family—each of these issues deserves study for its contribution to the overall learning experience within the Catholic school. These studies could explain more thoroughly how effectively the Catholic elementary school addresses its faith formation goals.

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