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REVIEW OF RESEARCH

SELECTED PROGRAMS FOR IMPROVING CATHOLIC EDUCATION: ATTEMPTING TO BRIDGE THEORY AND PRACTICE

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What constitutes research? To what end is it undertaken? How should it be conducted? We are attempting to answer these questions in an era in which policy makers and practitioners are growing in their skepticism toward the academy and research dollars are becoming increasingly scarce. Many wonder: Do researchers appreciate the wisdom and insight of practitioners? Does research improve the human condition?

Selected Programs for Improving Education (SPICE) is an initiative cosponsored by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) and Boston College. It began with a grant from NCEA's National Center for Research in Catholic Education Board. Using these resources, a number of practitioners and university-based faculty met to discuss ways to implement priorities for Catholic schools as outlined by participants in the Catholic Schools for the 21st Century Congress that took place in 1991. The SPICE developers, along with representatives of superintendents, assistant superintendents, elementary and secondary school educators, college faculty members, and other leaders in Catholic education, created a process to identify programs that are implementing the goals of the Congress, to assess their effectiveness, and to make them available for diffusion. The process unfolds as follows. First, an annual event titled Conversations in Excellence is held at Boston College. During the three-day conference, selected practitioners showcase their effective programs. Then experts in the domain chosen for a given year offer input, in both formal presentations and informal exchanges, that help practitioners assess their efforts and modify them. Diffusion takes place in several ways. NCEA publishes the proceedings, which include program descriptions, chapters written by experts who made presentations at Conversations in Excellence, and chapters germane to the topic contributed by

other experts. NCEA also serves as a clearinghouse to facilitate diffusion: A catalogue outlining the programs is distributed to the Catholic educational community; the NCEA Web site serves as a source of information and sharing; and SPICE programs are showcased at NCEA's annual convention.

For the past three years, Conversations in Excellence successfully assembled researchers, college and university faculty, and Catholic school practitioners to converse about that year's specific focus. In July 1996, Catholic elementary and secondary school educators from across the country shared their success stories about "Integrating Mission" into all areas of school life, including extracurricular activities and athletic programs. Dr. Robert Coles, Harvard psychologist and expert on the spirituality of children, added significantly to the conversation.

In July 1997, selected participants, educators, and researchers focused on the topic "Providing for the Diverse Needs of Youth and Their Families." Dr. Mary Walsh, a Boston College faculty member, was among the presenters. Dr. Walsh spoke on the "Critical Collaborations: School, Family and Community."

The July 1998 Conversations in Excellence was expanded to include representation from the business world since the topic was "Creative Financing and Resourcing of Catholic Schools." Financier Peter Lynch shared his expertise and vision with Catholic-school educators.

The 1999 focus is "Forming Innovative Learning Environments Through the Use of Technology." Educational technology has the potential for fundamentally changing how youth learn and, subsequently, how teachers teach. Technology programs that have brought about educational reform will be showcased.

The United States Catholic bishops' document, *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions*, influenced the choice of theme for the July 2000 Conversations. Catholic educators will share efforts to make Catholic social teaching integral and explicit in the school curriculum.

Back to our original question: Is this research? The National Center for Research in Catholic Education Board approved its grant for SPICE because it fell under the aegis of "action research." This systematic collection of information designed to bring about social change has several characteristics. First, the topics of inquiry were chosen collaboratively by superintendents and university faculty, based not only on the needs of practitioners but also on the broad range of educational literature. Second, the assessment process requires systematic inquiry. While the SPICE system is far from perfect, the process currently requires impartial jurors from schools, dioceses, and universities to make a determination of worthiness. The SPICE program also requires that applicants demonstrate that they have attained benchmarks appropriate to the topic (e.g., special education programs that stabilize enrollment, institutional advancement initiatives that increase income). Third, the program requires practitioners to present their program succinctly and pro-

professionally, first in person at the Conversations in Excellence conference and then through publication in the proceedings.

Whether or not one believes that SPICE as it is today is a research activity, it is certainly opening up rich areas for future research. SPICE developers are planning longitudinal studies of SPICE programs. In addition, the developers want better to understand how educational leaders learn about innovations elsewhere, tailor those innovations to the local exigencies, and then implement those changes effectively. Qualitative research projects, relying on observations and interviews, can afford rich insights. The topics chosen for inquiry must be based on practitioners' needs as well as sound research. As the developers decide what they will investigate beyond the five topics thus far (Integrating Mission, Providing for the Diverse Needs of Youth and Their Families, Creative Financing and Resourcing of Catholic Schools, Forming Innovative Learning Environments Through the Use of Technology, and Integrating the Social Teachings of the Church into Catholic Schools), they will carefully review the broad range of educational literature. They will also ensure that the topics chosen can be assessed fairly and intelligently.

SPICE is a new attempt to bridge the chasm between theory and practice by forming collaborations between the university and the school, between professors and superintendents, and between educational literature and local innovations. It is hoped that those leading other initiatives with similar goals will avail themselves of the opportunity to engage in an ongoing conversation on the pages of this journal.

Conversations in Excellence: Integrating Mission; Conversations in Excellence: Providing for the Diverse Needs of Youth and Their Families; and Conversations in Excellence: Creative Financing and Resourcing of Catholic Schools, the proceedings from 1996, 1997, and 1998 Conversations in Excellence, are available from NCEA. Call the publications office at 202/337-6232 or access the Website at www.ncea.org.

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