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Urban Catholic High Schools and Disadvantaged Females

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The purpose of this study was to discover the life experiences of disadvantaged female graduates of urban Catholic high schools and what they say about the capacity of Catholic education to meet their academic, emotional, social, and spiritual needs. Based on narrative inquiry, this study was conducted using a series of in-depth, semistructured interviews to elicit the life experiences of 5 participants. Twelve common personal characteristics emerged directly from the narratives of the participants and provided the backdrop for two patterns: (a) the importance of education, and (b) the importance of relationships. This study found the high school experiences met the academic needs of all participants, but the different school sites varied in their ability to meet the emotional, social, and spiritual needs. This study also found four characteristics interacted in creating the Catholic school culture: (a) building relationships, (b) promoting a sense of community, (c) supporting a caring and nurturing environment, and (d) emphasizing respect for all members of the school community.

Introduction

All schools build, function, and operate based on purposefully written mission statements. The following statements come directly from the mission statements of a number of the Catholic high schools from which participants in this study graduated: "Our school embraces students with differing degrees of academic readiness from diverse ethnic, linguistic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds." "Our school seeks to develop a sense of personal dignity, independence, and service...[and] promotes the development of the whole person by instilling spiritual values, inspiring love of learning, sharing knowledge, and practicing skills." "Our school offers a rigorous and responsive academic program which includes the mastery and application of basic skills, the assimilation of higher knowledge, and the cultivation of critical and independent thinking." "Our school encourages each young woman to identify and celebrate the presence of God in her personal life and in community with others." "Our school strives to build a curriculum

and promote a climate which will inspire students to practice Christian values in a pluralistic society.” The significance of these statements suggests that the role of Catholic education in meeting the academic, emotional, social, and spiritual needs accounts for its success with disadvantaged students.

Background of the Problem

Catholic high schools meet academic needs by providing (a) strict academic structure (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993); (b) an emphasis on high academic achievement (O’Keefe & Murphy, 2000); (c) curriculum content that reflects the culture of students (Kelly-Stiles, 1999); (d) sensitivity to differences in learning styles (Russo, Adams, & Seery, 1998); and (e) support and encouragement from teachers (Bempechat, 1998; Bryk et al., 1993; Ridenour, Demmitt, & Lindsey-North, 1999).

Bempechat (1998) found that Catholic school teachers “focused on establishing appropriately high expectations for their students, holding each to a high standard, and providing the academic support that [would] enable students to meet the school’s standards” (p. 56). Such focus promoted the belief that all students can learn. In an in-depth study of 7 Catholic high schools, Bryk et al. (1993) found teacher commitment and expectations of excellence resulted in students who responded with “high levels of engagement with classroom activities” (p. 99).

Catholic school teachers perform many roles in the school—instructor, coach, counselor, advocate—and describe their work as ministry (Bryk et al., 1993; Ridenour et al., 1999), suggesting that teachers view themselves as more than instructors of a specific subject. Teachers are also concerned with the kind of person each student will become, resulting in teachers seeing themselves as role models to their students (Bryk et al., 1993; Ridenour et al., 1999). In addition, Catholic school teachers receive lower salaries than public school teachers. Yet, teacher commitment has not suffered (Bryk, 1996; O’Keefe & Murphy, 2000).

Although studies point to the ability of Catholic schools to provide educational practices that promote achievement among disadvantaged student populations (Bempechat, 1998; Ekert, 2000; Kelly-Stiles, 1999; Russo et al., 1998), little research has considered specifically the perspectives of disadvantaged females who graduated from urban Catholic high schools. This study examined five methods for meeting emotional needs: (a) maintaining personalism as a norm of the school community (Bryk et al., 1993), (b) building caring relationships, (c) promoting the belief that all students can learn, (d) providing an environment that promotes student self-esteem, and (e) reflecting

the cultural values of the students (Kelly-Stiles, 1999). Personalism occurred when there existed “an extended role for teachers that encouraged staff to care about both the kind of people students become as well as the facts, skills, and knowledge they acquire” (Bryk et al., 1993, p. 301). Similarly, Catholic high schools meet the social needs of students by (a) developing a strong sense of community (Bryk et al., 1993), and (b) providing opportunities for students and teachers to share experiences (Bryk, 1996).

Finally, this study examined three means for meeting spiritual needs: (a) inspirational ideology (Bryk et al., 1993), (b) importance of religious understanding, and (c) a shared belief system (Bryk, 1996). Bryk et al. (1993) described inspirational ideology as “the pursuit of peace and social justice within an ecumenical and multicultural world. . . . It is seen in the explicit content of the shared values that ground the Catholic communal organization—caring and social justice” (p. 303). Similar to inspirational ideology was the idea of a shared belief system: “This set of shared beliefs establishes a common ground which orders and gives meaning to much of daily life for both faculty and students” (Bryk, 1996, p. 29). The importance of religious understanding reflected the aim of

schooling to nurture in students the feelings, experiences, and reflections that can help them apprehend their relations to all that is around them—both the material world and the social world, both those who have come before them and those who will come after. (p. 37)

One central question guided this study: What do disadvantaged female graduates of urban Catholic high schools say about the capacity of Catholic education to meet their academic, emotional, social, and spiritual needs? The findings of this study are expected to add to the existing body of knowledge on current effective Catholic educational practices that seek to meet these needs, as suggested in the mission statements of many Catholic educational institutions. As narratives, the findings provide the reader with the opportunity to reflect on the life experiences of the participants as they relate to his or her own experiences and for the purpose of practical application. The use of female participants gave voice to the needs and issues significant to women.

Research Method

This study used narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to discover the stories and life experiences of 5 disadvantaged female graduates of Catholic high schools located in urban areas. Purposeful sampling was used

to select 5 participants representing a variety of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. The theories of Bourdieu (1977) and Jencks (1991) assisted in determining the criteria used in this study for selecting participants. The criteria of “disadvantagedness” for the participants in this study came from the fact they were female and from family environments of lower economic status. The participants’ parents might not have a steady income or they might have worked at low-paying jobs. For some, their primary language was not English and their culture was other than middle-class American. For some, their parents did not have a college education and lacked the knowledge to direct them through the application and admission process necessary for college entry. Any one or several of these factors could capture the meaning of “disadvantaged” for each participant. In addition, each participant was invited to clarify and describe her personal criteria of “disadvantagedness.” The possibility also remained that a participant might not describe herself as disadvantaged.

In-depth, semistructured interviews were used to capture and describe the stories and life experiences of the participants, revealing the extent to which Catholic education met their needs in school. The narratives shed further light on the notion of being disadvantaged, as well as whether or not participants considered themselves disadvantaged. Each participant was interviewed six times for 60 to 90 minutes over the course of 15 months. Using open-ended questions, each of the six interviews focused on a single central topic: background of the participant, including family members, childhood experiences, and early schooling; description of the Catholic high school each participant attended; discussion of experiences relating to academic development; experiences that met emotional needs; experiences that met social needs; and experiences that met spiritual needs. Following each interview, participants were invited to maintain a personal journal in which they could elaborate on interview responses or share any additional stories or life experiences that could enhance or clarify what was shared during the interviews.

Member checking of all transcripts, research texts, and narrative texts ensured the trustworthiness and credibility of the study (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 1999; Maxwell, 1996; Seidman, 1998). A series of open-ended interview questions provided the means for realizing and understanding the experiences and stories of each participant. A protocol of initial questions provided a framework and direction for all interviews, which produced biographical information of participants, narrative stories, personal experiences, and responses to questions related specifically to this study. Participants read their transcribed responses and had the opportunity to add, delete, or modify any portion of their transcribed responses. Each set of transcripts evolved into a

personal narrative with an accurate representation of each participant, as well as the significance of common themes and differences as they related to the purpose of the study.

Confirmation of findings resulted from the connection of numerous in-depth, semistructured interviews, individual personal stories created from participant interviews, personal journal entries, and the categorical analysis of responses as they related to the conceptual framework. Multiple member checking with each participant assured reliability of the findings. The findings were based on the analysis of all interviews, journal entries, personal stories, and narratives and corresponded with the conceptual framework to answer the research question for this study. The findings are presented in two ways: (a) as descriptions of each participant's life in profiles; and (b) as analyses of responses, narratives, journal entries, and personal stories relating specifically to the research question.

Participant Profiles

Table 1 represents a profile of relevant information on each participant and her high school. The first eight categories present background information of each participant, including the criteria of disadvantagedness for each participant, such as ethnicity, citizenship, family income level, number of parents in household, primary language of the participant, and whether or not the participant was the first in her family to attend college. The next eight categories represent details on each participant's high school, such as high school setting, grades serviced by the high school, enrollment size, ethnicity of students and teachers, average family income level found at the high school, grades attended by each participant, and year of graduation for each participant. All information for the categories came directly from interviews and journal entries from the participants.

Profiles of Disadvantagedness

Each participant shared her views on whether or not she considered herself to be disadvantaged, according to the criteria of disadvantagedness presented in this study. Jenny's mother was an immigrant from Africa, whose primary language was not English. Her father was a minister, and when Jenny was young, her family lived in a parsonage, a home provided to clergymen and their families by the parish. Although Jenny did not describe her family as having any significant financial problems, she described her first house, the parsonage, as situated in a "very run down" section of the city. She described incidents of crime and violence in their neighborhood. Jenny's father did not

Table 1

Matrix of Participant and High School Profiles

Category	Jenny	Julie	Janet	Kelly	Nina
Sex	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
Ethnicity	African American	Asian (Vietnamese)	Canadian American	Euro American	Latina (Dominican Republic)
Religion	Non-Catholic	Non-Catholic	Catholic	Catholic	Catholic
Citizenship	American (Mother/African Immigrant)	Immigrant (Mother/Vietnamese Immigrant)	American	American	American (Mother/Dominican Immigrant)
Family income	Middle Class	Low Income	Low Income	Low Income	Low Income
Household	Two-Parent Household	Single Parent (Mother)	Single Parent (Mother)	Two-Parent Household	Single Parent (Mother)
Primary language Monolingual/Bilingual/Multilingual	English (Mother/Multilingual Three Tribal Languages)	Vietnamese/First French/Second English/Third	English	English	Spanish/First English/Second
Attended college	Mother	First in Family	First in Family	First in Family	First in Family
High school setting	Coeducational	Coeducational	Coeducational	All girls	Coeducational
Grades serviced by high school	7-12	9-12	7-12	9-12	9-12
Size of high school	Large 1,500	Small 250	Mid size 700	Small 300	Mid size 900
Ethnicity of students in high school (estimate)	White 80% Asian 10% African American and Latinos 10%	African American 80% Haitian 15% Asian 5%	All White	White 40% African American and Haitian 30% Latina 30%	White 60% Latino 30% African American and Asian 10%
Ethnicity of teachers in high school	Mostly White 2 Latinos	Mostly White 2 African American 1 Asian (Chinese) 1 German	All White	Mostly White 1 Asian	All White
Average family income level at high school	Middle-class Incomes	Low-income levels	Middle-class incomes	Low-income levels	Mixed-income levels/low-income/middle-class incomes
Grades attended by participant	9-12	11-12	9-12	9-12	9-12
Graduation date	2001	2000	1999	2001	2001

earn a large salary; however, his position as a minister placed the family in a high social status in the church community.

Jenny stated her disadvantagedness came from the fact that she was a Black female and often felt she had to “prove myself as capable...when people label me as an African American. And that Black females are weak [and]

sexually promiscuous. As a female, people see me as weaker, not as smart, or very emotional.” She also stated she did not see herself as disadvantaged because she had such a “close and supportive family.” Jenny’s home life, especially her relationship with her father, provided her with emotional security and encouragement to do well in school.

Julie was an immigrant to the United States and disclosed numerous elements of cultural differences. Born in Vietnam, Julie grew up in France and finally emigrated to the United States. She spent most of her life adjusting to cultural and language differences, as well as religious differences. Raised in a single-parent household for most of her life, Julie described her family as the “struggling class”:

When my parents arrived in France, they had nothing at all. There was this place that would take care of them through an immigration program. They helped my mom find a job and they sent her to this town. Then she was transferred to [another] little town. You go where you have a job because they [jobs] are very hard to find. When I was 13, my parents divorced. He [father] didn’t want to pay support because in Vietnam, men don’t do that. Men don’t owe anything to anybody, especially not to a woman and her kids.

Left with minimal skills, Julie’s mother had to work low-paying jobs to support her family. Although her mother started college in a third world country, she was not able to finish her education, making Julie the first in her family to attend college.

Janet grew up in a single-parent household. Because her mother had a low level of education, she was forced to accept low-paying jobs. Janet described her family as low-income level, “living paycheck to paycheck.” She stated she was disadvantaged “financially, always worried about money.” Janet stated her family lived in a housing assistance program for low-income families. Like Julie, Janet was the first in her family to attend college. Any guidance in the admission process must come from outside sources, such as the school. Those like Julie and Janet can have difficulties at home with understanding the demands of college life, both academically and socially. Janet also stated she was disadvantaged “being raised in a single-parent family environment, missing that ‘dad’ relationship. I am lacking in a father figure in a really big way.”

Janet explained class issues she experienced in her high school. Like Jenny, Janet transferred to her high school in ninth grade. For both participants, their schools started in Grade 7. Janet provided significant descriptions of the difficulties adjusting to social groups that had already formed in Grade

7: “It was hard to break in. The popular kids had already formed a clique.” Janet clearly described the separateness of those with financial resources, the “popular kids,” from the “smart girls” like herself, whose families struggled with finances. In addition, Janet made clear distinctions between the types of houses in her neighborhood as the “nice and not so nice” houses. She resented that the school was located in a diverse area of the city where those with low income lived and that the school bused in the “popular kids” from outside the city where those with middle- and upper-middle-class incomes lived.

Kelly described her family as low-income level. Her father’s medical condition put a considerable financial strain on her family. Kelly and her mother had to take on the burden of supporting the family. With minimal education, Kelly’s mother was forced to accept lower-paying jobs, such as working in a nursing home or in a bakery, and to work long hours. She described the stress caused by her father’s disability and the family’s financial needs.

My time is so limited due to family responsibilities, dad out of work and disabled, working for tuition money and living expenses. All my [earned] money goes to helping at home or tuition for college. My family does not understand the pressure this is for me. I have no social life. I have no time to just stay on campus even to study because I have to go home to take care of my father.

Like Janet, Kelly was the first in her family to attend college. Kelly explained her family’s disadvantagedness was primarily financial, complicated by her father’s inability to work and his personal care needs.

Nina came from a single-parent household. Her mother was an immigrant to the United States and came from a poor family with limited education and job skills. Spanish was the primary language of Nina and her mother. As a single mother with a low level of education, Nina’s mother was forced to accept lower-paying jobs to support the family. Like Julie, Janet, and Kelly, Nina was the first in her family to attend college. Nina described her understanding of her disadvantagedness:

My mother was new to this country. I didn’t speak the language [English] at first. My mother was a single parent. I started off with all those disadvantages at first. And also that we just don’t have money. But we work for it....We just don’t have it. So those are the disadvantages. But my mom worked hard and I am working hard....But the high school that I chose to go to helped me because it is college prep and it prepared me for college. High school reinforced it.

Common personal characteristics emerged directly from the narratives of the participants. All participants were hard-working, smart, good girls. They did well in high school, got good grades, or were considered honor students. All participants stated education was important. All participants shared that as young children they moved from a familiar neighborhood and school and were unhappy with the move. All participants made friends easily, especially in elementary school. They discussed witnessing crime, violence, or danger. Finally, all participants maintained positive attitudes in spite of adversities.

Although not necessarily common to all participants, several additional characteristics emerged from the narratives. Several participants discussed the significance of language. Julie and Nina were either bilingual or multilingual. Jenny, Janet, and Kelly expressed the desire for or appreciation of learning another language. Several participants had support from extended families, including grandparents, aunts, cousins, adult friends, peers, or teachers. Three out of the 5 participants' parents were divorced with single mothers as head of the household, suggesting the need for extended family support. Several participants were non-critical of Catholic education, with significant positive experiences with teachers. Several participants reported making friends in high school. However, two participants attended mid size and large high schools with mostly White student enrollment. These same two high schools served Grades 7 through 12. Both participants attended these schools for Grades 9 through 12 and reported difficulties making friends. Making friends was easier for the three participants who attended smaller high schools serving Grades 9 through 12.

Analysis of Responses, Narratives, and Journal Entries

The following description and analysis synthesized the relationship between the narratives and the capacity of each participant's high school to meet her academic, emotional, social, and spiritual needs.

Academic Needs

All 5 participants stated that their Catholic high school experiences met their academic needs. Each participant felt well prepared for the demands of college. All shared that their high schools followed a strict academic structure that was challenging and demanding. Julie and Kelly reported their high schools "had strict guidelines for the college preparatory program; there were no frill courses" offered at their schools. Nina stated teachers and students assumed "college was the next step after graduating from high school."

All stated their high schools emphasized high academic achievement, with their teachers and peers motivating students to excel. Jenny and Julie reported that their teachers held high expectations for all students. Jenny's teachers stressed "excellence in writing and reading and applying what was read." According to Jenny, her advanced placement English teacher applied the subject to real-life situations and "made you think." Julie's English and history teachers were demanding, with "high expectations for research and writing." Although she maintained self-imposed academic excellence, Julie stated she felt "supported and encouraged by teachers and students," which assisted her in adjusting to a new language and culture. Kelly reported that her English courses were "demanding and developed writing and critical thinking." Nina's English teacher encouraged her to move into Honors English and "to share my views through writing and how I saw things as a Latina." In addition, all of the participants stated teachers were always willing to provide extra support. Jenny had difficulties in calculus and physics and her teachers assisted her with their support and extra help after school. Julie stated her teachers and peers were sensitive to her needs as an immigrant, especially in learning a new language. She did not feel "put down," but instead she was "encouraged to move forward." Janet shared that her math teacher "helped her succeed" in math by providing additional tutoring. Not only did her teachers prepare her for college, but they also assisted Janet "through the college application process, completing college applications, requesting recommendations from teachers, and writing college essays." Kelly shared that teachers at her school "adapted their teaching styles to meet the needs of the students in class."

Teacher commitment correlated with the significance of teachers' multiple roles. All participants shared their teachers "were not just teachers but also coaches, advisors," and "someone to talk to when they had any problem." According to Jenny, her English teacher "respected all students and looked out for their general well-being." Julie stated, "My teachers prepared me for American college culture." Kelly stated her school "had two counselors; one for academics and one for personal problems." Because the teachers also directed extracurricular activities, "everyone was close to the teachers. The teachers were more than just teachers." Nina acknowledged students felt comfortable going to teachers with academic and personal concerns. Janet shared, "the strongest quality of the school was the teachers." The narratives reveal that teachers were the most significant factor in meeting the academic needs of all 5 participants.

Emotional Needs

This study found all of the participants experienced personalism among their teachers. Another relevant characteristic in meeting the emotional needs of students was building caring relationships, which all of the participants experienced at their schools.

Jenny and Janet stated the teachers were very supportive and expected all students to do their best. Julie shared that students, as well as the teachers, helped her “both in learning a new language and learning a new culture.” Julie stated, the “teachers and students encouraged and supported” her, making her “able to focus on adjusting to a new culture and language.” Julie’s school also promoted a cooperative form of learning without competition. She shared that “you don’t have the cool group and the group of not-so-cool people. You have the smart ones, but they also studied with those who were struggling with their classes....Students helped [me] develop self-love and build self-confidence.” This self-confidence and self-love was something Julie had never felt from her former peers in France. Julie’s biology teacher told students “everyone can do great things.” Kelly stated anyone could “get help from teachers if you needed it. Teachers helped everyone in lots of areas.” Nina indicated the teachers expected all the students to graduate and go on to college. In addition, Nina found the “atmosphere of coed students taught me to speak up [for myself]; not be intimidated with male presence.”

This study also found that 3 schools reflected the cultural values of the students. Jenny shared that “the values from home lined up with the school values.” Julie felt she “had the same academic expectations as the school. Teachers had an understanding of the cultural differences of the students, that [because of financial struggles] the students had jobs, different problems, family issues, and came from poor homes.” Julie often stayed for hours after school because the “teachers and students were so warm and inviting, unlike the family” she stayed with when she first arrived in this country. Her biology teacher helped her “find a better place to live” soon after her arrival at the high school. Kelly stated the students were culturally diverse, “but all were respectful to each other. I left 50 best friends [after high school].” Nina was very active in the local Boys and Girls Club. Her high school, in conjunction with the Boys and Girls Club, provided a healthy support system for Nina. The staff at the club worked with the teachers and administration at her high school to encourage Nina and others to excel.

Janet’s high school, however, did not meet her emotional needs. According to Janet, the administration seemed to favor the “popular, rich kids.” Janet expressed her resentment of the unfair treatment of certain students by the

administration. She felt they received this special treatment because many of their parents contributed money to the school. Janet had several friends from her previous elementary school with whom she maintained friendships throughout high school. Because Janet was such a good student, she was liked by the teachers.

Social Needs

One way to meet social needs was by developing a strong sense of community. Jenny found the teachers modeled “genuine concern for each other, as well as for the students.” Julie shared that since her school was small, “the teachers and administration were very nurturing. Everyone said hello.” Kelly, who also attended a small school, stated, “it was like family. Everyone knew each other.” Kelly and Jenny also stated their school communities often convened for joyous celebrations, as well as family tragedies and losses. Kelly felt supported through her father’s sudden illness. Her teachers understood if she asked for an extension on assignments or if she had to leave school early or come in late so she could take care of her father. Jenny’s school collected donations for the families of local firefighters after a tragic fire in the community killed several firefighters. Similarly, Nina’s school was small enough so “everyone felt comfortable going to the teachers with problems.” Events, like annual retreats, also brought students together in a special way. Kelly, Nina, and Janet reported that although these retreats met their social needs, retreats did not meet their spiritual needs. All 5 high schools observed annual student retreats. On these occasions, students usually went to a retreat house off campus to pray together, to discuss relevant concerns and issues, and to participate in community-building activities and spiritual inspiration. These retreats were also opportunities for personal reflection and prayer, alone or with others.

Both Jenny and Janet stated their high schools had not met their social needs. Both high schools were relatively large schools, which might account for some of the difficulty in creating a sense of community, at least for these 2 individual participants. Janet felt her high school did not meet her social needs in spite of her involvement in several extracurricular activities, such as dance team, service club, yearbook staff, Future Business Leaders of America, and the National Honor Society. Student cliques neither reached out to others nor let other students in. Janet was close to several teachers who were also her coaches and activity directors. On several occasions, Janet stated “the strongest quality of the school was the teachers and their willingness to help students.”

Spiritual Needs

All 5 participants shared involvement in social justice issues and activities. Each of their high schools required students to perform some form of community service. Religion courses included discussions on morality, ethics, homelessness, poverty, nonviolent resolution to conflict, and other social issues. Julie, Kelly, and Nina stated such experiences and discussions “inspired and motivated” them to become involved in the greater school community.

Jenny participated in community service as a requirement for senior year religion. Julie was involved “in a leadership program exploring issues like violence, homelessness, and AIDS care” and participated in Christian Service where she worked with young children tutoring in reading and writing. Kelly shared her involvement in “lots of events around homelessness, Oxfam Fasts, and Social Justice Club.” Nina’s “religion classes focused on social justice issues, morality, racism, sexism, classism, and the treatment of prison inmates.” Such discussions of social justice issues encouraged Nina to become involved in her community by working at the Girls’ Club as a leader of the younger girls’ group. In this role, Nina drew on her own experiences at the club to act as counselor, activity leader, and role model to younger girls.

Jenny stated her school’s ideas on morality and relationships were of the same value system as what she learned at home. For her, the values of home and school were coalescent. Julie shared that her Catholic school experience greatly impacted her faith, and the teachers “taught me to see God in everything and everyone.” Her teachers “inspired” her by their teachings and behavior. She also stated, “I learned a lot about myself.”

All 5 participants stated their schools offered many opportunities for prayer and reflection. All schools began each day with morning prayer over the intercom system. Each of Nina’s classes began with prayer. Janet and Kelly stated there were many visible symbols of Catholicism in every classroom. All 5 schools celebrated holy days and special days in community. The schools respected the faith of students who were not Catholic. These students shared their beliefs in class discussions, and they were not expected to participate in liturgies. Jenny stated she “developed an appreciation for other faiths” and “found meaning in all celebrations and services, even though I am not Catholic.” All participants stated their schools offered a course in world religions, giving students an ecumenical view of spirituality. Nina shared the atmosphere at her school “fostered my spirituality and strong faith.”

All 5 participants also described the significance of annual class retreats. It was while Julie was on a retreat with her peers that she decided to convert to Catholicism. Janet shared how at one retreat she “learned so much from

students I wouldn't ordinarily talk with at school." Kelly described her senior retreat as "the most meaningful because it was our last time together. We prayed for each other's safety." Similarly, Nina stated the "memorable junior retreat impacted how I saw my peers and brought us closer together."

Jenny stated, "religion was the foundation of the school and it put a lot of faith and trust in God, which is a foundation for later in life." Julie shared, "high school greatly impacted my faith." Her high school experiences impacted her values and ideas on social justice issues, but she would not necessarily describe herself as a "practicing Catholic." Nina, on the other hand, stated her high school experiences "fostered her spirituality, which grew into a strong faith." Discussions and experiences involving social justice issues moved Nina to become involved in community service and to advocate for the needy in her area.

Janet and Kelly stated their high schools had not met their spiritual needs. Janet received her spiritual direction from her local parish Church where she remained involved. Kelly described herself "as spiritual but not necessarily religious." Nevertheless, Kelly shared that her high school had not met her spiritual needs due, in part, to her disinterest in spiritual matters.

In summary, this study found the participants had varied experiences in urban Catholic high schools. All participants stated their high schools met their academic needs. The data revealed teachers were significant through their support and encouragement and in their capacity to perform multiple roles. Caring and nurturing relationships, as well as shared values and experiences, contributed to a sense of community where individual high schools met the emotional and social needs of the participants.

Discussion

Stanton-Salazar (2001) found support systems in school settings had more meaning in the lives of children from low-income and working-class families than in the lives of children from middle-class families. These support systems primarily come in the form of teachers as instructors and mentors, teachers as coaches and activity directors, and from school counselors. The data from the participants in this study concurred with this finding. Four of the participants described having mentoring relationships with at least one significant teacher, with Nina describing the significance of counselors from the local Girls' Club. Jenny, who described her family background as middle class, was an exception. She identified her family, especially her father and her older sister, as the two support systems in her life. These support systems, which Stanton-Salazar referred to as network systems, can, however,

create conflict with a teacher's position of authority, placing the teacher in the position of choosing between advocating for the student and maintaining the established order. In other words, teachers as advocates for students in lower-class status must choose between the best interest of students or keeping social class order and maintaining the status quo. More research is needed to explore how this conflict manifests in urban Catholic high schools serving disadvantaged students.

Bowles and Gintis (1976) stated that schools maintain standards of control by which children internalize the expectations of society. This maintenance occurred in schools where lower- and working-class students had few choices about academics. These schools were characterized by more regulations and procedures in areas of discipline and general behavior, and less freedom for students to explore personal interests. Schools with students from middle-class families had more freedom to explore personal interests, more choices in areas of study, and more freedom to learn through a wide variety of educational opportunities. In this study, all 5 participants revealed their high schools had a strict academic structure and few opportunities for choice in course selection. All students were expected to follow a standard college preparatory program, with the prospects of post secondary education as the norm for graduates of their high schools. Ironically, the "standards of control," as described in Bowles and Gintis, although restricting at the time, enhanced each participant's preparation for the rigors of post-secondary educational experiences. Each participant revealed that her high school prepared her for the demands of college through rigorous coursework and high teacher expectations.

This study emphasizes important areas of professional development needed to support teachers in providing for the academic, emotional, social, and spiritual needs of disadvantaged students. Institutions of higher education need to evaluate their teacher training programs to include coursework and experiences that lead teacher candidates to an understanding of the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This includes courses on multicultural practices, the significance of language to learning, training in assessing and understanding the individual needs of students beyond academic needs, and training in identifying and addressing a variety of learning styles. The participants in this study indicated the necessity for Catholic educators, as well as teacher training programs in Catholic institutions of higher education, to explore ways to meet the spiritual needs of all students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Furthermore, school administrators must provide for ongoing professional development for teachers who lack experience or skills for addressing the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Finally, this study suggests the importance of listening to the experiences of students from disadvantaged backgrounds to understand life from their perspectives. The knowledge gained from such stories assists in determining what educational institutions need to provide to ensure the success of disadvantaged students.

Implications for Research

This study raised the possibility of research in several possible areas:

- Regarding the mission of Catholic education in the 21st century, will Catholic education continue to play a role in serving disadvantaged females?
- Using similar methods, would the results be the same for males from similar backgrounds who graduated from urban Catholic high schools?
- How do Catholic high school teachers view their roles in meeting the needs of disadvantaged female students?
- Further research could explore follow-up interviews with the same 5 participants in 5 to 8 years to see how things developed for them. Do they feel the same or differently about the capacity of Catholic education to meet their academic, emotional, social, and spiritual needs?
- Further research could include a similar study with five participants from similar backgrounds who graduated from urban public schools.

The 5 participants in this study represent students found in today's urban Catholic high schools, as well as in many urban public schools. Their stories and life experiences shed light on the educational experiences and outcomes of today's disadvantaged students who are served by Catholic schools.

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