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## Tensions Between Catholic Identity and Academic Achievement at an Urban Catholic High School

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*Through a secondary analysis of a case study on successful school leadership, this study inquired into the lived experiences and understandings of Catholic identity from the perspectives of administrators, faculty, staff, and students at one urban Catholic school in the northeastern United States. Participants generally spoke about Catholic identity in terms of its explicit or implicit nature. Specifically, explicit Catholic identity relating to campus ministry, faith formation of students, and community service were noted to be areas for improvement. The analysis showed that tensions concerning the school's Catholic identity were sidelined in the pursuit of academic excellence as measured by standardized tests, benchmarks, and college acceptance rates. We argue that embracing and taking seriously, rather than avoiding, the tensions concerning Catholic identity in a Catholic school might contribute to vital community dialogue, invigorating learning, and consequent spiritual and academic growth.*

**H**ow Catholic identity is viewed or conceptualized is highly variable and amorphous, often changing by person, context, and time period. One can look to recent debates over doctrinal elements of the Catholic Church and the role of women religious to see the varied and widespread way the Catholic faith is practiced and interpreted (Goodstein, 2012). Catholic hospitals and other social services as well as Catholic universities have long debated what it means to be Catholic (e.g., John Paul II, 1990). Indeed, Catholic identity within Catholic K-12 schools can also be elusive and merits further exploration.

The most recent document on Catholic schooling by the U.S. Council of Catholic Bishops (USCCB, 2005) begins by stating, "All Catholics must join together in efforts to ensure that Catholic schools have administrators and teachers who are prepared to provide an exceptional educational experi-

ence for young people—one that is both truly Catholic and of the highest academic quality” (introduction, para. 1). In a pluralistic church with widely varying views and an array of religious practices, it is challenging to define what it means to be “truly Catholic.” A further challenge includes empirically defining the “highest academic quality” in a competitive urban school marketplace. While historically Catholic schools have been acknowledged for their high academic quality, particularly for ethnic minority, immigrant, and urban youth, as well as for their spiritual and moral commitments (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Louie & Holloway, 2009), the dearth of economic resources and changing urban demographics have threatened urban Catholic school sustainability as numerous schools have closed and others are fighting to remain afloat (O’Keefe & Scheopner, 2009). Public school choice options are also widening and competition across sectors in urban areas is becoming more acute (Ravitch, 2010). In order to maintain the viability of urban Catholic schools, the quest for a strong Catholic identity and evidence of high academic quality has become urgent.

Through a secondary analysis of a case study on successful school leadership at one urban Catholic school serving economically marginalized students, this study inquired into the lived experiences and understandings of Catholic identity from the perspectives of administrators, faculty, staff, and students. It seeks to unpack the varying ways participants discussed Catholic identity as implicit and explicit as well as how they understood Catholic identity to be both individual and collective. Ultimately, the analysis showed that tensions concerning the school’s Catholic identity were sidelined in the pursuit of academic excellence as measured by standardized tests, benchmarks, and college acceptance rates. In conclusion, we argue that embracing and taking seriously, rather than avoiding, the tensions concerning Catholic identity and academic quality in a Catholic school might contribute to vital community dialogue which invigorates learning and consequent spiritual and academic growth.

### **Defining Catholic Identity**

From Catholic Church documents to scholarly models, the “unique Catholic identity” (USCCB, 2005) of Catholic schools has been described in diverse ways. As Groome (1996) explains, “being Catholic can vary across many cultural expressions, theological positions, and with different degrees and styles of participation in the institutional expression of Catholicism” (p. 107). Still,

there are many overlapping ways that Catholic identity is conceptualized, with most scholars generally citing one or more of the following components: holistic education, community, relationships, visuals/symbols, Gospel values, Catholic social teaching, and service. For example, Groome (1996) articulated an expansive vision of what Catholic education should aspire to through a “collage” of five distinguishing characteristics: anthropology, sacramentality, community, tradition, and rationality, with three “hinges”---personhood, justice, and Catholicity. Groome expands upon the four central purposes of Catholic schools proclaimed by the USCCB (2005): “to provide an atmosphere in which the Gospel message is proclaimed, community in Christ is experienced, service to our sisters and brothers is the norm, and thanksgiving and worship of our God is cultivated” (no. 1). Similarly, Miller (2006) outlined “five essential marks” that reveal a school is “authentically Catholic” (p. 17) based on a synthesis of the major education documents of the Holy See since Vatican II. These are: a supernatural vision, a Christian anthropology, communion and community, Catholic worldview throughout the curriculum, and Gospel witness.

While Groome (1996) and Miller (2006) address many similar themes, Groome (1996) embraces a broader, more ecumenical view of the Catholic school, even stating that non-Catholics or people of no faith could be “fine ‘Catholic’ educators because they share the appropriate perspectives and commitments” (p. 107). On the other hand, Miller (2006) specifies the need to hire committed, practicing Catholics who can serve as transparent witnesses of Christ. These distinctions can have important consequences when considering Catholic identity in the day-to-day realities of school hiring and community building.

The new *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* (Ozar & Weitzel-O’Neill, 2012) also define characteristics of Catholic schools as discussed in Vatican and USCCB documents. Such characteristics include being centered in Jesus Christ, educating the whole child, and contributing to the evangelizing mission of the Church. Indeed, these standards explicitly highlight academic excellence, citing Canon Law that says Catholic schools must be at least as academically rigorous as the neighboring public schools, as well as accessible to all students. Catholic identity has become one of the major concerns for Catholic schools today (Martin, 2012) as evidenced in these new national standards that begin with mission and Catholic identity. In fact, a recent large-scale, nationwide survey of Catholic teacher and administrator perceptions of Catholic identity af-

firmed that a “school’s culture or faith community is the most important component” (Convey, 2012, p. 208).

### **Catholic Identity and Academic Success**

Research comparing Catholic and public schools has often equated Catholic schools with high academic quality (Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982), which has been intertwined with the school’s Catholic identity (Bryk et al., 1993; Grace, 2002). For instance, in the classic study of Catholic high schools by Bryk and his colleagues, one of the distinguishing features of Catholic school success was an inspirational ideology that is powered by reflection on Christ, the Kingdom of God, and the hope of the resurrection. They concluded: “Such images evoke our humanness. They add a depth to a schooling process that is otherwise dominated by a rhetoric of test scores, performance standards, and professional accountability” (p. 303). The uniqueness and effectiveness of Catholic schools was attributed to their sense of community, built through shared activities, including a core academic program, extracurriculars, and religious activities. Similarly, Porath (2000) explains: “Seeking to be the very best academically is not a distraction from the school’s purpose. Rather, not to be the very best in its academic program is to deny the Catholic school’s essential character and role in the progress of culture” (p. 236).

Academic success and Catholic identity have also been seen as a possible point of tension. In his study of 58 urban Catholic schools, Grace (2002) found that the pursuit of high test scores had the potential to “distort the Catholic educational mission from its Catholic purposes” (p. 179). Statements by the Vatican seek to ensure Catholic schools as Christian schools are centered in Jesus Christ (*Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education*, 1977, para. 34) and do not, as Miller (2006) explains, “fall into the trap of academic success culture, putting their Christological focus and its accompanying understanding of the human person in second place. Christ is ‘fitted in’ rather than being the school’s vital principle” (p. 22). Miller (2006) emphasizes how education must be centered on the dignity of the human person and not about the accumulation of wealth or getting ahead in the business world. The emphasis on Christ as “*the* Teacher in Catholic schools” must be made explicit (Miller, 2006, p. 24).

### **Catholic Identity and Social Justice**

Catholic identity and social justice can be articulated both in terms of the students served as well as the outcomes the school seeks to foster. For instance, Scanlan (2012) focuses on school practices of exclusion and inclusion of students with disabilities and varying language abilities, and on how an explicit commitment to Catholic social teaching which honors the dignity of the human person, a commitment to the common good, and a preferential option for the marginalized are essential to a “school claiming a Catholic Identity” (p. 75).

While Martin (2012) describes the “key to maintaining the Catholic identity of schools” (p. 50) as a welcoming environment, he also points to the “bottom line” of Catholic schools, which is to form other-centered men and women who can make a difference in this world” (p. 49). Cook and Simonds (2011) discuss ways teachers and school leaders can develop critical thinking skills regarding the intersection of culture and faith, like caring for the environment and engaging with people from different religions. They hope that their framework centered on relationship building “challenges Catholic schools to ask whether their mission is truly lived out in the lives of their graduates” (p. 324).

### **Catholic Identity and Faith Leadership**

Many scholars note that the transition from religious to lay leadership in Catholic schools has resulted in questions about how to sustain Catholic identity (Carr, 2000; Earl, 2008; Grace, 2002). Catholic school principals often cite faith leadership as the most important characteristic of Catholic school leaders (Ciriello, 1989, as cited in Wallace, 2000; Harkins, 1993; Schuttloffel, 2004). Although most research focuses on the principal, at the high school level the pastoral minister often functions as an “extension of the principal, [who] animates the communal life of the school” (Bryk et al., 1993, p.141) and as such, fulfills a key position in Catholic schools in relation to faith leadership.

Often, faith leadership is evidenced by the explicit involvement of principals in religious activities. For instance, through interviews with ten Catholic urban elementary school principals and drawing from national survey data, O’Keefe (2000) concluded: “In many ways, principals are de facto pastors of religiously diverse communities” (p. 236) because they serve

as pastoral counselors, lead public prayer, and have “credibility as an authentic person of faith” (p. 237). In a study of whether the faith leadership of principals influenced the faith outlook and development of 20 new teachers, Coll (2009) found that teachers cited their principal’s actions as an influence on their own religious sensibility and participation in religious activities outside of school. Principals were visible at religious events, sent clear faith messages through discussion of weekly gospel readings, and created a sense of community.

Other research on faith leadership moves beyond explicit modeling or teaching of Catholicism and focuses on implicit elements. For example, in an in-depth, qualitative study of 60 urban Catholic high school headteachers (or principals), Grace (2002) found that 33 of them made “strong and explicit references to faith leadership” and “conveyed a sense of personal spiritual vocation as central to their conceptions of the role of a Catholic school leader” (p. 135). The other headteachers had a discourse of “‘good works’ as exemplars of faith in action” (p. 136). Seventeen headteachers stated that their personal mission was to serve the poor. Similarly, in his study of three urban schools, Scanlan (2011) found the principals articulated and practiced an ecumenical critical spirituality focused on equity and inclusivity. For example, one principal said, “Catholicity is in our outreach.” Another principal focused on anti-racism programming. Although the “three schools were undeniably Catholic in their identity” in terms of physical symbols and Catholic rituals, the study centered on the principals’ more implicit understandings of Catholicism, which led them to develop support structures for new teachers, commit to service in the community, and welcome non-Catholic students (Scanlan, 2011, p. 306).

Nationwide surveys and studies across numerous schools (e.g., Convey, 2012) are helpful to describe broad notions of Catholic identity; however, unpacking what is meant by claims of school culture and faith community could point to a particular worldview (Porath, 2000), academic success (Bryk et al., 1993), a focus on relationships (Cook & Simonds, 2011) and/or public worship (e.g., Denig & Dosen, 2009). After all, divergent viewpoints about what characterizes Catholicism can often be found in the same religion department (Youniss & McLellan, 1999).

### **Competition, Sustainability, and Catholic Identity**

Market reforms, standards, and prescribed curriculum seem to be affecting all U.S. schools (Dorner, Spillane, & Pustejovsky, 2010; Hargreaves & Shirley,



2009). Given this finding, it seems important to inquire how school communities perceive their Catholic identity in relation to accountability measures and notions of school success, and how some Catholic schools, particularly urban ones, might struggle to prove their excellence in a sea of school choice. In countries that require Catholic school students to be evaluated through national tests, Catholic school leaders have noted the challenge of meeting government demands and navigating a results-based educational market while also heeding the Catholic school mission to serve impoverished students (Belmonte & Cranston, 2009; Grace, 2002).

Many scholars have highlighted curricular and cultural aspects of Catholic identity that contribute to Catholic school sustainability and their marketing appeal. Cook & Simonds (2011), for instance, contend that in a highly competitive school marketplace, the unique contribution of Catholic schools can be found in building relationships in their school community and beyond. Heft (2011), too, in his description of the “full vision of Catholic education” (p. 89) as the integration of moral and theological knowledge, a deep sense of each subject’s history, an emphasis on art, speech, and drama, and a commitment to service, surmises whether parents would not sacrifice immensely to send their students to Catholic schools if they provided a clearer alternative to the public school offerings.

Again, this appeal to the uniqueness of Catholic schools lies in their Catholic identity which is seen as the “heart,” the “glue,” and the “lifeblood” as it “provides a sense of unity...in the midst of diversity” (Martin, 2012, p. 49-50). The degree to which teachers perceive their school to have a strong Catholic identity (i.e. faith formation, religious practices, and school mission) “significantly adds to the prediction of the vitality of a Catholic elementary school” (Hobbie, Convey, & Schuttloffel, 2010, p. 18). Nevertheless, how Catholic identity might provide this unity and nourish this vitality remains largely unstudied.

### Methodology

While there are varied, broad conceptions of Catholic identity in the literature, little research has been conducted on how Catholic identity might be articulated differently across an entire school community. A disconnect exists between theoretical discussions of Catholic identity with multiple, complex characteristics and empirical studies which focus heavily on the views of principals, a few specific manifestations (e.g., social justice), and often do not



consider the relationship between academic excellence and Catholic identity in today's urban schools. These studies skirt the diversity of viewpoints that exist within a school community and downplay how school context might influence those views. Therefore, the following research questions guided this case study analysis: *How do the school administrators, faculty, staff, and students in one urban Catholic high school perceive the school's Catholic identity and mission? What contextual factors do the school community perceive to influence the enactment or lived reality of their Catholic identity?*

This study of Catholic school identity arises from a secondary analysis of a multi-perspective case study completed at St. X High School, a 9-12<sup>th</sup> grade Catholic college preparatory high school serving low-income students from several urban neighborhoods and communities in a large U.S. Northeastern metropolitan area. This case study is part of the International Successful School Principal Project (ISSPP), an international study of the practices of successful school principals in 15 countries using multi-site case study methods and cross national comparisons. Schools in the ISSPP project are chosen using common criteria: evidence of increased student achievement over time as well as school reputation and community nomination of successful leadership. St. X High School was nominated for participation by the superintendent and associate superintendent of the local Catholic archdiocese. After an initial site visit including an informal interview and review of the school's data with the principal, the school was invited to participate.

The larger case study focused on notions of success and the role of school leadership in supporting school success. However, because this was the first case study of a U.S. Catholic school in the ISSPP, we added four additional interview questions to the protocol which asked the participants to rate the school's Catholic identity and whether, how, and to what extent this was evidenced in the daily life of the school. It is important to note that St. X was originally chosen due to its proven academic success with low-income students and for its strong leadership, rather than for its focus on Catholic identity.

### **Context**

St. X is a 9-12<sup>th</sup> grade co-ed Catholic college preparatory high school serving low-income students from urban communities. The small school serves 311 students and 100% of the seniors in the last two years were accepted at four-year colleges. Over the past ten years, the school has experienced tremendous

change—including a change in campus location as well as moving from a school sponsored by a religious order to an archdiocesan school with missionary priests. Further, the school experienced a change of school model and recently the school's academic standards were raised exponentially.

Student population during the 2011-2012 school year was 49% Latino, 44% African American, 3% White, 2% Asian, and 2% Other. The average family income of the students is just over \$25,000. At least 58% of families live under the federal guidelines for poverty and 89.5 % of the students qualify for the federal free and reduced lunch program. A majority of the students (72%) come from public middle schools and 42% of the students are non-Catholic.

During the 2011-2012 school year, the school had 38 full time teachers, administrators and staff, including 3 Catholic priests. The majority of teachers and staff interviewed had been teaching or working at the school for less than five years. The school has a president-principal governance model, where the president, a layperson, focuses on external relations and finances and the principal, a priest, has primary responsibility for instruction and the day-to-day operation of the school. Additionally, St. X operates with a Board of Trustees consisting of 18 members.

### Participants and Data Collection

Seeking to maximize variation (Miles & Huberman, 1994) in our sampling, all faculty staff, and administrators at the school were invited to take part in the study and 16 (or 42%) volunteered to participate. Three board members and one parent also volunteered to be interviewed for a total of 20 adult participants. Ultimately, two semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal and president and one individual interview was conducted with four middle-level administrators as well as four staff members, five teachers, three board members, one full-time volunteer, and one parent. Twenty-two interviews were conducted and on average each interview lasted one hour. We also conducted two separate focus groups (45 minutes each) with a total of sixteen graduating senior students. Data collection took place at the school in May and June 2012 and all interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researchers.

### Data Analysis

Using an iterative process, each participant's data was coded "more or less directly from the informant's words" or through "summary glosses" of our par-

ticipants' statements (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 36). Inductive codes were developed and organized through a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The codes were then clustered together to form larger, more interpretive categories and a coding map was formed, which indicated the evolving conceptual framework. HyperResearch software was utilized which resulted in 85 initial codes. Sample codes produced included: faith conversations, adult faith formation, role of religion classes, outward symbols, and role of community service.

### Findings

The findings focus on the different and sometimes conflicting ways the participants described Catholic identity, especially in terms of the relative emphasis on implicit as well as explicit forms. They also explore participants' understanding of why explicit Catholic identity is lacking, the tensions involved in making curricular choices in order to achieve measurable student success, and how Catholic identity might be developed in the school in the future.

#### Implicit Catholic Identity

When participants spoke about the school's implicit Catholic identity, they described it in terms of being a part of everything that they do—as human dignity, a whole person approach, relationships, work and drive, and academic excellence.

**“In everything we do.”** When asked to rank the Catholic identity of the school on a scale of 1 to 10, the administrators clarified that their ranking represented either an explicit or implicit orientation. For example, the principal ranked the Catholic identity as explicitly a 6 and implicitly an 8, while another administrator said, “I would give us a 3...But in terms of the bigger picture I would probably say a 7 or 8.” Generally, the participants seemed to agree that there is an underlying or implicit Catholic identity that undergirds the school. The implicit Catholic identity was explained as the “way we approach our work” (the principal), the “bigger picture” (academic dean), “ingrained in who we are” (middle level administrator), “small c Catholicism” (president), and comes through in “everything we do” (staff member). Referring to the diverse ways one could interpret the question, one administrator said, “I think it's kind of a trick question because I think the mission of the school is wholeheartedly Catholic.” In contrast, one of the teachers said that the Catholic identity “feels kind of, almost like an extracurricular more than one of our foundational principles.”

Many of the administrators and staff also tied the Catholic identity to the school's mission to serve low-income students. Moreover, some of the teachers and administrators understood their deep commitment to the school's mission as naturally flowing out of their own personal Catholic identity. One teacher stated: "Personally for me, it influences me in the sense that I very greatly feel that I live my faith. I don't talk about it as much as I like to show it." Many administrators and staff expressed their dedication and commitment to the school's mission quite passionately, "I love [the mission]. You know I feel very strongly about helping this population of students is the right way to go" (development director), "I definitely kind of fell in love with the model and the school" (staff member), or "I think we're serving exactly who I think God wants us to be serving" (middle level administrator). As one board member expressed it, "taking care of those kids is the mission of our Church. My belief. And that's the importance of it." The administrators and staff echoed the U.S. Catholic bishops' message that economically marginalized students are a priority for the Church's educational enterprise (USCCB, 2005) and expressed an understanding of Catholic identity based in social justice (e.g., Martin, 2012; Scanlan, 2012).

**Human dignity, whole person approach, and relationships.** The principal and one of the other administrators described the strong implicit Catholic identity in terms of recognizing the inherent dignity of each student and accompanying these students through difficult times. This focus on relationships has been a key part of Catholic school success (Bryk et al., 1993; Louie & Holloway, 2008; Merritt, 2008). He explained,

I say that implicitly we are pretty heavy because most of the hard decision making from the point of view of working with families and working with students is very, is heavily Catholic in the sense that there is a certain attention to the person...you would say that everybody is a Son of God so everybody is valuable and the value of people is not given by what they do but by who they are.

The principal went on to discuss how the faculty and staff at St. X are most present and available to the students when difficult decisions have to be made, such as a student being asked to leave the school, or when complex issues arise, like when a student becomes pregnant or a student is caught drinking at a school event. This, he believes, makes the school distinct because in his experience "when the road gets tough...is when people [in other

schools] withdraw from the relationships with students and parents.” Importantly, nearly all of the participants corroborated the principal’s deep connection to students and families as well as his role as a mentor. The school counselor talked at length about the home visits she and the principal as well as others have completed in order to better communicate with parents. Undoubtedly, the focus on relationships has been an integral part of Catholic education (Cook & Simonds, 2012).

Another way participants discussed the care for the person was in terms of holistic education. The school counselor explained, “Having a more holistic perspective while not explicitly Catholic is seen throughout the school and embodies the values of looking at the whole person, always trying to find out what more is going on and not allowing ourselves to jump to quick conclusions.” The president referenced the term often connected with Jesuit schooling, *cura personalis*, or care for the whole person, as something that can be seen in all aspects of the school, particularly “through the integration of counseling, college and personal counseling.”

**Work and drive.** The participants spoke about the demanding nature of their particular jobs, the long hours, the “intensity” of the work, and the stress that accompanies running a private school for economically marginalized youth. Only the principal, however, discussed the work the school is engaged in as intricately connected to its Catholic identity. He acknowledged that members of the school community are very driven and work very hard, and characterized this dedicated work ethic as part of a larger Catholic mission. He explained:

The work defines a lot of what we do in a very subtle way and in the sense that it opens the question of how do we work and what do we value and how do we value... To me, it’s a very, very exciting thing because it needs to teach people how to work and work has a value and from the Catholic perspective, it has a very important value to the point that it’s become a right in many countries.

Indeed, Catholic Social Teaching discusses worker rights and relates work to vocation (USCCB, 1986).

**Academic excellence.** Academic excellence was seen as both intrinsic to the Catholic identity of St. X as well as antithetical to it. In the context of discussing the school’s success, all participants referred to the students’ high

college acceptance rate. The participants expressed a deep desire to increase student retention from freshmen to senior year.

Commenting on the school's focus on academic excellence, the principal explained that, "Part of being successful is that you are mission-driven and part of the mission of a school like ours is being Catholic." The president also discussed this desire to improve and be academically excellent as arising from the Catholic tradition. He specifically noted that while Catholic schools have been excellent for students in the suburbs and that national leaders such as Bill Clinton benefited from Catholic education, St. X faces different challenges: "We're serving kids who are behind academically. We need to be excellent with them. So I think our tradition influences what we do. We want to be excellent just like Catholic schools have always been excellent." This focus on academic excellence was exactly what one teacher mentioned immediately when questioned about the school's Catholic identity. However, contrary to the president's response, this teacher stated: "The main focus in this school right now is the academic piece, preparing the students to be successful in college. In that aspect, I don't see the Catholicism, I don't see the Catholic influence as being that predominant." Again, a strict concentration on academic excellence was seen as both supporting Catholic identity and in competition to it.

Another staff member saw Catholicism as heavily influencing the academic focus and setting the school apart from other area schools concentrated solely on achievement, testing, and tutoring. As he explained, "we flip [the academic piece] upside down. That's not our end. That's a consequence of what we do. Our main goal as a Catholic institution is to help each student discover within him or herself their own dignity which comes yes, from God, which comes from the fact that they are not defined by where they come from."

### Explicit Catholic Identity

When participants discussed overt signs of Catholic identity, they referred to opportunities for prayer, masses, and retreats; the presence of priests on the faculty; and religious symbols in the school.

**Prayer, masses, and retreats.** The participants who ranked the Catholic identity as a 5 or below focused on the overt moments of prayer found in the daily life of the school. They explained how this midrange/low ranking indicated that while some aspects of Catholic identity are present, they are



not enough. Still, the majority of participants talked about the existence of prayer before class, prayer before leadership team and board meetings, occasional masses, and the grade level retreats at some point in their discussion of Catholic identity.

**Priests on faculty.** Many participants related the presence of priests on campus to its Catholic identity. Nevertheless, there was a diversity of viewpoints concerning whether the priests specifically affected the school's Catholic identity. For instance, the person who ranked Catholic identity the lowest (giving it a 2) said, "There's a world religions class and a few priests walking around the halls. That's about it" (middle level administrator). Another participant referenced how there was a dearth of Catholic identity in the school by replying in a sarcastic tone: "We had two priests and now we have three" (staff member). On the other hand, some participants indicated that having priests on campus had a deeper meaning and served a larger educational purpose. The president felt conversations with priests were extremely important: "The second thing about the Catholic nature of the school is that it does give, create a spirit in the school in which kids can talk about anything with a priest." He gave the example of a conversation he witnessed a few days previously between one of the teachers, a priest, and a group of students around gay marriage. Furthermore, one student who participated in the focus groups said that the priests on campus were approachable and "down to earth....Like they don't seem....You know how priests are very, like not above you but like distant in general? Like they're so personal (at St. X) it's hard to, you think of them not so much as priests anymore just like, guys."

Most of the participants felt that being a priest affected the principal's leadership, whether allowing for a strong rapport with families to be established quickly (school counselor) or inciting a bit of fear and respect in students and parents (development director and staff member). While one staff member didn't think the faculty really cared one way or another that the principal is a priest, a middle level administrator felt that teacher evaluations were more profound, or perhaps more personal, coming from a priest. She explained:

The places that we're able to go because (the principal's) a priest and just that we're a Catholic school...You find yourself when you're talking to a priest, you put your guard down a little bit more.



One of the board members also indicated that the principal's identity as a priest was related to his success with connecting with students in meaningful ways.

Lastly, a few participants discussed the charism of the principal's religious order as relating to the Catholic identity of the school and his success as a leader. One middle level administrator put it this way:

I think there are a lot of people who could just call it part of the principal's personality but I just know through conversations with (him) that it actually also has to do with his whole calling....(He) wants to see students as beautiful and wants to help them see in life what is beautiful. And for (the principal) that has a very religious meaning. But some people would not associate it with his Catholicism or our Catholicism as a school.

Another administrator reiterated this focus on beauty and explained:

What [the charism is] very focused on, at least in the principal's descriptions of it to me, is love and beauty and finding how to live a life not consumed by the need for power. And, so that very much influences things like why the school is painted the colors that it is and why we have so much art on the walls. I mean, that piece of it is, but it's not Catholic in that we don't force everyone to say Mass.

The principal also related beauty to curiosity ("Why am I interested in this? Because it is beautiful") and noted that beauty reveals God in the world. Indeed, the administrators who worked closely with the principal were able to articulate his particular Catholic worldview and vision for the school.

**Religious symbols in school.** While a few participants connected aesthetics to the charism of the principal's order, there was almost no mention of religious symbols in the interviews with the exception of one volunteer who lamented the lack of religious statues. Nonetheless, when asked purposefully about outward religious symbols and signs in the school, the president responded:

I mean, in the library we have churches, pictures of churches, and we have in the conference room, pictures of churches. We have crosses in all of the classrooms. I mean, it's there but it's not there...If you were to walk into some other schools, it might feel more quote un-quote

Catholic. I don't know. But I think our place feels, it certainly feels different to a kid than a public school. I mean, that's the whole idea. You walk into this place, you want to feel different.

The walls of St. X are carefully painted in soft pastel hues, framed museum artwork adorns the library and the president's office is decorated with pictures of the saints. The principal and another administrator described this physical environment as part of the Catholic identity. Certainly, the physical space and Catholic symbolism has been a hallmark of Catholic schooling (Miller, 2006) and previous research has explicitly described the presence of these symbols as indicating a school's Catholic identity and contributing to its Catholic culture (Cook, 2001; Furst & Denig, 2005; Scanlan, 2011).

### **Establishing an Explicit Catholic Identity**

In their interviews participants referenced needed areas of growth such as campus ministry, religious identity/faith formation of students, and service. Often, these areas of growth were discussed in contrast to the school's focus on academics.

**Campus ministry.** The faculty, staff, and administrators indicated that the explicit Catholic identity of the school was in need of improvement and nearly everyone, except the principal, related this to campus ministry. The president noted that once the school puts a campus minister in place, "We'll have even a more pronounced vision of this place." Some thought that this should be a priority; however, others thought that the school's focus on academics and the overarching support, such as counseling services, was sufficient. One of the middle level administrators discussed the vibrant campus ministry program that included service trips, spiritual counseling, and student-led, inter-faith prayer services present before the school turned to a sharper academic focus. "We used to be much better at it. (Interviewer: You used to be better at Catholicism?) (laughter) Yes." Another teacher concurred: "We have been without a campus minister for a number of years and I think that has affected the Catholicity of the school."

Still, the principal expressed concerns about simply putting more time, resources and personnel into campus ministry as an expression of Catholic identity: "I don't like the idea of campus ministry because it compartmentalizes everything. It's kind of like, okay, so you are the people who are in charge of God." He described how he wanted more integration of the school sup-

port systems and extracurricular activities. Catholic church documents on Catholic schooling would support the integration of faith and culture as well as the integration of a student's faith and life (Miller, 2006; Sacred Congregation of Catholic Education, 1977).

**Religious identity/faith formation of students.** Three participants qualified their Catholic identity rating with an explanation focused more specifically on student faith formation. While nearly everyone spoke of campus ministry as a means to heighten the Catholic identity in the school generally, these participants felt that the school should provide more avenues for students to grow in their faith:

Because I identify that as an area that we need to grow in our school and not necessarily say we have to have more masses or we have to pray more often or but I think that, encouraging our students to grow more in their faith, whatever it might be or to question their identity...If we could do more to support the development that's done, not only personally, academically but also in terms of whatever their religious identity might be. (staff member)

But I don't see us doing anything in regards, very much in regard to formation. I mean I think of a Catholic school as where young people get formation and formation of their faith and exploration of their spirituality, and kind of develop a Catholic identity and that's where I think, but I don't see that happening very much at all. I see some attempts and I definitely hear a desire but I don't (see it). (middle level administrator)

We have many students here that are not Catholic and yet the role of faith in their life is something that needs to be nurtured and I think that's what has been missing. (teacher)

In these three cases, the participants saw developing the religious identity of the students as vital to a Catholic education.

Finally, one administrator argued that "it's our job for students to be able to articulate [the Catholic identity] so I think that's an area of improvement. We know it's an area of improvement." She felt it was not enough to have a strong overarching Catholic identity (she gave it an 8) but acknowledged that students must be able to identify this "bigger picture." Indeed, the students told us that they did not feel Catholicism really impacted the school at all. One of the two focus groups of students rated the Catholic identity as a four

out of ten and in the second, a student told us, “I never considered it a real Catholic [school].” Another student explained that she didn’t feel the school was very Catholic because they didn’t “do anything. Well, I mean, my mom was a Jehovah’s witness so I never, I was like, I don’t want to go to a religious-based school but then I ended up coming here and I was like, okay, we don’t do anything.”

The students associated Catholic identity with visible traditional religious practices, particularly the Mass and its frequency, and did not make any distinctions between explicit and implicit Catholic identity. Moreover, some students drew on their experiences at Catholic elementary schools that seemed more overtly Catholic and found their high school didn’t measure up by comparison. For example,

Interviewer: So, what difference does it make that this school is Catholic?

Female 1: Not really. We don’t do as much as say like [Catholic elementary school], they’ll have like Mass all the time. We’ll have mass like—

Female 2: Once a month.

Female 1: Not even!

Female 3: Once in every while.

Male 1: In the basement or in the auditorium.

Female 2: It’s mandatory. It’s not even like class mass. It’s just like a speech, basically.

Female 1: Yah. And it’s not all the time.

The students we interviewed appreciated the school’s attention to learning and the deep care that was evidenced through the teachers’ long hours and extensive availability. “I’ve stayed here till 9 p.m.,” remarked one student. Another student described the school as having “the better aspect of a Catholic school” because her previous school required regular mass attendance on Sunday. She explained, “I’m really not that religious so when I come here I was like okay, I’m getting the good aspect. I learned religion and I study that and it’s like, I’m not forced.”

The staff is cognizant of the challenges of including non-Catholic students as well as wanting to provide a warm, inclusive atmosphere. One of the staff members, a teacher, and the principal each discussed how students couldn’t relate to the Mass at school and often didn’t even participate. The principal expressed skepticism about the role of the Mass in the lives of today’s youth and didn’t believe that forcing the students to attend was an

appropriate approach. As one staff member stated: “Mass is painful to go to. None of them know what’s going on. You know? They don’t want to interact.” He related this unease to student social pressure as well as the faculty and staff not wanting to “to beat them over the head with it at times because we know that a lot of the kids aren’t [Catholic]. We don’t talk about God in everything. It just doesn’t always come up.” One teacher acknowledged that “maybe if the students understood what they were doing, Mass might be more meaningful.”

**Service.** A small number of participants mentioned that the Catholic component of the school could be better fostered through community service projects. A middle level administrator stated: “Service, who we are to be men and women for others, I think that’s lacking but certainly we prepare them well academically.” The president acknowledged that the service program could be more profound and noted that they hadn’t “given it the attention it needs...it needs more reflection.” Finally, when another staff member fondly recalled a service project she had participated in years ago, she lamented the fact that the community service program had been pushed aside. She felt the students should “Go to nursing homes, going to daycare to paint the walls or whatever. Just doing something around service. We don’t do that. We used to do it but we don’t do it anymore.”

### Emphasizing Academic Success

The administrators and teachers noted unapologetically that it was a strategic choice in recent years to focus heavily on math and reading skills for their students. Proficiency exams and benchmarks were established, data were studied carefully regarding students’ progress, curriculum was developed, and teachers received extensive professional development and coaching in these areas. Therefore, other subjects, including religion, have necessarily taken a back seat. When discussing the school’s shift to focus on preparing every student to be college ready, an administrator explained the change in the schedule and the move to double blocks of math and English. Before the shift,

Math was just as kind of equal as religion as was equal to Spanish as was equal to English. Looking at our students and who was coming in they don’t have the skills that they needed coming in. He [the principal] took a strong stance in saying, ‘Right now English and reading is going to be more important than religion in our curriculum.’  
(academic dean)

In a transparent fashion, the school decided which subjects would receive the most attention. Again, this clear positioning of religion as a less emphasized subject was also revealed when the president spoke about the school's decision to hire a reading specialist and his plan for how and when they would work with the students:

They'll pull students out of classes. So we pull them out of art, Spanish, religion even and they would make up—If they don't have enough time, they'd make up their time over the summer... This would be layered on top of our proficiency program and the reading director would also do professional development with all the faculty and staff.

Ultimately, this emphasis on math and reading has proven to be academically successful with more St. X students passing the proficiency tests and achieving notably higher SAT scores.

While the school still struggles with retaining and graduating all of the incoming freshmen, attrition and retention are a current priority and the administration is hoping that the addition of a reading specialist will help support those students who can't seem to keep up. Certainly, the school wants to serve its students well and also maintain adequate enrollment in order to remain financially viable. The school president noted the high competition for students in their urban community and said that St. X strives to be the best school for students who are one to two years below grade level. The principal's goal of creating a professional learning community rather than an explicit faith community fits with these academic targets. He commended the growth in his faculty:

For teachers, actually for our community, our teaching community is very much driven more and more even next year by the fact that it's a community that wants to learn... to teach... teachers go into other teachers' classrooms, we look at exams...

All of the teachers interviewed expressed deep appreciation for this learning-centered environment. Nonetheless, one teacher stated that he missed the adult community building that had previously been fostered by the campus ministry program. Consistent with the principal's academic focus, however,

this teacher mentioned that a critical friend's group had been established, which encouraged teachers to support one another through dialogue around academic and student issues.

### **The Future Role of Catholic Identity at St. X**

While participants agreed that Catholic identity needs to be more explicit, they were in disagreement about what aspects of Catholic identity should be emphasized and how Catholic identity might be realized. One teacher saw the explicitness of the school's Catholic identity developing in time as academic "stability becomes more of a given." Another viewed the contrast between campus ministry and the focus on college readiness and college retention as "fluid" and "not always static." Either way, the principal felt that "self-reflection" and thus, deepening "the human capacity, the human experience of the students, and the adults" is key to school success. For him, the school does not need "more communal activity, more masses, or better retreats...it's a piece of the puzzle but it's not the core of the puzzle." Ultimately, the principal explained, "I'm always more interested in the implicit (Catholic identity) than I am in the explicit."

### **Discussion**

Our findings indicate that a collective understanding of Catholic identity has not been developed and nurtured at St. X. Moreover, the example of St. X shows that the school context, particularly the academic success culture, can sideline rigorous reflection on the relationship between the implicit and explicit dimensions and how collective and individual Catholic identities are articulated by the school community.

In terms of the school's mission for all students to attend and graduate from college, St. X exhibited what Senge (1990) calls generative (or creative) school-wide learning. The participants were able to articulate the current reality of their community's Catholic identity in terms of "telling the truth about where they are," but were not able to see "clearly where they want to be" (Senge, 1990). Little shared vision was expressed about how the school could collectively build a stronger Catholic identity, or consensus of whether a stronger identity was even needed. Yet, each participant was able to articulate the strengths and weaknesses of the school's Catholic identity. Some



participants felt that there was no need for more religious activities in terms of public prayer or mass, while others thought this was precisely what was needed. Some participants felt there was a need for campus ministry, while others felt that compartmentalizing campus ministry would only weaken or at least have very little effect on the overall Catholic ethos.

Even though the principal and others, particularly the president and some of the teachers who had attended Catholic universities, or had participated in Catholic missionary or service programs, might possess “vocational commitment” or spiritual capital (Grace, 2010), these individual commitments have not translated into a collective understanding of Catholic identity in the school. The principal, a priest, articulated the most expansive and nuanced discussion of the school’s Catholic identity; yet his Catholic worldview did not trickle down to the students and many of the teachers. Catholic school research suggests focusing on the individual religious formation of teachers and principals through higher education (Grace, 2010), personal spiritual direction (Earl, 2012), or spirituality and virtue seminars (Earl, 2008) to enhance the Catholic identity of the school. While these might be helpful, given our findings, it appears that more than individual formation may be needed.

Our participants also discussed the long hours and subsequent stress that accompanies the goals of preparing academically underprepared students for college. While Miller (2006) states that Catholic educators today need religious formation equal to their professional formation, we wondered how this might be implemented at St. X without overloading an already busy schedule.

The school seems to lack sufficient opportunities for both teachers and students to develop or foster a religious identity, whether individual or collective, whether Catholic or other faith tradition. This seems to be a missed opportunity. Dallavis (2011) argues that attention to students’ religious identity, belief, and practice contributes to the cultural competence, and thus, the academic achievement, of a school. Indeed, these explicit opportunities need not be empty as some of the participants feared, but could be developed as rich possibilities for deep, critical thinking. Given that the students showed a great deal of affection for the principal, expressed gratitude for the school, and felt that the principal as well as the teachers cared deeply for each of them, the opportunity to discuss and explore what for many is sensitive and personal seems ripe.

In the larger case study, we found that St. X has broadly distributed leadership with regards to academics and wondered if provisions might be

made for the promotion of Catholic identity to be distributed as well. Most literature seems to focus on the principal as the one who ensures the Catholic identity of the school (e.g., Ciriello 1989, as cited in Wallace, 2000; Schuttlofel, 2004). Future research might consider personal theological literacy and religious formation as one attribute of Catholic school principals (Belmonte & Cranston, 2009), and the principal's ability to foster professional development about Catholic identity throughout the school community as another skill. In other words, one may be an animated and inspired Catholic school leader (Grace, 2012) but may still struggle with fostering open, honest conversations with faculty and staff about what this Catholic identity means for the school and the community. We found that while the Catholic identity at St. X was influenced by the principal's charism, participants expressed several other notions about how Catholic identity might be emphasized and practiced. Catholic identity might be better understood as a synthesis of ideas, values and beliefs, rather than something that is determined by the school administration. Indeed, if a school without a religious sponsorship depends solely on the faith leadership of the principal, the Catholic identity of the school might falter should this person leave the school.

Our findings suggest that in an urban context where most of the students are entering high school with academic skills below grade level, the school leader may need to prioritize and concentrate on a small number of fundamental objectives. Moreover, the broader academic, external factors must be considered. Unlike Catholic schools for upper middle class students, St. X's competitors are theme-based public schools and charter schools. This competitive reality in an urban context is real and cannot be separated from questions of Catholic identity.

The literature on Catholic school leadership cites the multitude of demands experienced by Catholic school principals (O'Keefe, 2010); the tensions present in maintaining Catholic identity in a highly competitive system (Grace, 2002), with non-Catholic students (Donlevy, 2009), or with lay leadership; and often focuses on faith leadership as the number one priority (Schuttlofel, 2004). Given St. X's reality, it seems sensible for the principal to heed generally accepted school reform advice, which involves managing the "inevitable distractions and competing pressures so there can be a sustained focus on a small number of key goals" (Levin, 2009, p. 70). The principal's change agenda involved strategic thinking as he translated "the vision and moral purpose" of creating an academically rigorous school "into action"

(Davies & Davies, 2009, p. 16). Quite a few of the teachers acknowledged the “strategic abandonment” (p. 22) of explicit aspects of the school’s Catholic identity, including campus ministry, faculty retreats, and spiritual formation, in order to “make capacity available for future improved practice” (Davies & Davies, 2009, p. 22). However, the example of St. X also reveals that too narrow a focus on a few goals and tactical abandonment might, as many participants lamented, lead to a loss of explicit spiritual centrality.

Although a campus ministry program had not been developed at the time of this study, some of the participants noted that this should become more important over time after the school tackled student retention. Perhaps this could be seen as “strategic timing” (Davies & Davies, 2009) on the principal’s part to balance the school’s readiness to take on another internal reform and outside forces. On the other hand, unique aspects of Catholic schooling, including service to others and critical reflection that engenders an inspirational ideology (Bryk et al., 1993) seem to be negatively affected by competitive pressures. While St. X may not have the same external reform pressures as a public school and has led its own improvement efforts, school choice and other market forces including funding pressures still influence the leadership’s strategies and focus. Research has shown that all three sectors (public, charter, and Catholic) are affected by these accountability reforms (Dorner et al., 2011).

Grace (2002) has argued that market influences and accountability pressures challenge the mission of contemporary Catholic schools. In discussing publicly funded schools in England, Grace (2002) concluded “the danger is that contemporary Catholic schools may find a greater sense of confidence, achievement and public recognition by concentrating their energies in the market curriculum rather than in the relatively invisible outcomes of their spiritual and moral curriculum” (p. 51). Certainly, St. X was influenced by this market approach since the administration and teachers frequently mentioned college readiness and acceptance as measures of success. However, there is something more complex at work here because the majority of the St. X community did not seem to view reading and math skills as a “market curriculum,” or conceptualize learning as simply raising test scores. Nearly everyone interviewed felt that their dedication to serving the neediest students was intricately related to their implicit Catholic identity.

### Implications

St. X seems to be well situated to take on the task of professional development regarding Catholic identity. Teachers and administrators have embraced extensive professional development focused on language and math skills, were frank about both the challenges and successes of the school, remain student focused, and are passionately dedicated to their work. Nonetheless, the areas of instructional and Catholic formation have seemingly remained separate. The principal has fostered transformational adult learning through teaming, providing leadership roles, engaging in collegial inquiry, and mentoring (Drago-Severson, 2004). Perhaps these same skills may be used to empower adult learning in the spiritual and religious realm.

Given our findings it seems that a school's Catholic identity might be better understood as a process of dialogue and reflection rather than something a school does or does not possess. The tensions between implicit and explicit identity as well as the personal and collective must be negotiated. Ideally the staff, faculty, administration, students and parents should be involved in what Murray (2002) calls "disciplined conversations" that begin by articulating their own ideas about what a Catholic school should be. While many participants had individually considered and reflected upon the Catholic identity of the school, it was unclear whether a systematic school discussion had occurred where everyone felt their voices had been heard and their ideas considered.

The diversity of beliefs concerning Catholic identity should come as no surprise given the tensions and disagreements about Catholic Church teachings. Further, faculty, staff and students at every Catholic school will certainly have varying relationships to the Catholic Church and even Christianity. McLaughlin (2000) asserts that avoiding rigorous examination of the beliefs and practices of Catholicism "significantly undermine[s] the aim of achieving clarity about Catholic educational distinctiveness" (p. 150). It is vital for Catholic school communities to know and understand how the Church articulates the mission of Catholic schools in its ecclesial documents as well as how various religious orders understand their charisms.

Discussions informed by Catholic school documents should pay particular attention to the way Catholic identity is evidenced by who the school serves, the qualities it aims to develop, and the teaching atmosphere and culture it seeks to create. The Catholic identity and mission perception surveys re-

cently made available in the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary* (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012) provide one way to engender overt discussions of Catholic identity across all stakeholder groups. Developing Catholic schools that form teachers and students who can articulate the tensions and complexities of a Catholic institution's mission, particularly their school's Catholic identity can raise student achievement through the formation of moral, critical thinkers with a religious sensibility. What makes Catholic schools unique should be both implicit and explicit and build on the diverse individual religious identities of all members of the school community in order to create a dynamic and invigorating collective identity for everyone.

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