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Ursula S. Aldana  
*University of San Francisco*

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## “Does Jesus Want us to be Poor?” Student Perspectives of the Religious Program at a Cristo Rey Network School

Ursula S. Aldana, University of San Francisco

*The structure of Catholic schools improves achievement by providing multiple opportunities for face-to-face interaction, the development of meaningful relationships between students, teachers, and other members of the school community, and a shared set of beliefs among all school members (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993). Despite a substantiating body of research for this assertion, few empirical studies exist on how the religious program might impact the intrapersonal and interpersonal development of students. The Cristo Rey Network (CRN) of schools was developed in response to the material realities of students and families living in Chicago (Kearney, 2006). The leaders of the network, motivated by Catholic social teachings that recognize and prioritize the poor, developed the corporate work-study Catholic school model to make the Catholic school experience accessible for low-income families. This ethnographic study explored the impact of the CRN on the religious program of St. Peter High School (pseudonym) and, in turn, how the religious program used the lived experiences of Latino and African American students. Findings point to a need for teachers at CRN schools to be aware of students' cultural and social identity and to develop an appropriate pedagogical response in religious spaces to strengthen students' academic, social, and spiritual identities.*

### Keywords

Catholic schools, Cristo Rey Network, religion, social class, Culturally relevant pedagogy, critical pedagogy, low-income youth

Recent studies of Catholic education have emphasized its positive influences on academic achievement (Altonji, Elder, & Taber, 2005; Morgan, 2001), especially for students from low-income backgrounds at the secondary level (Huchting, Martin, Chavez, Holyk-Casey, & Ruiz, 2014). One such example of Catholic high schools committed to improving the social mobility of low-income students is the Cristo Rey Network (CRN) schools. The CRN schools offer students a rigorous academic experience as well as the social skills via a corporate work-study program to prepare them for postsecond-

ary and career success. Emerging research on Cristo Rey schools points to the power of a college-going culture and its positive impact on low-income Latino and African American students (Aldana, 2014). Furthermore, the CRN reports (according to National Student Clearinghouse) “for the graduating classes of 2008-2012, 90% of Cristo Rey graduates have enrolled in college and for the graduating classes of 2005-2007, 42% have graduated from college” (Cristo Rey Network, 2015a).

However, less is known about the ways that Catholic schools can influence social development, and even less so for historically underserved students. In a national study of Catholic schools, Bryk et al. (1993) found that “Catholic schools benefit from a network of social relations, characterized by trust, that constitute a form of social capital” (p. 314). They argued that the social structure of Catholic schools improves achievement by providing multiple opportunities for face-to-face interaction, the development of meaningful relationships between students, teachers, and other members of the school community, and a shared set of beliefs among all school members. Despite this body of research, few empirical studies consider how the religious program might impact the intrapersonal and interpersonal development of students. Catholic schools contribute to the development of strong relationships through an emphasis on religious activities and service. Students in Catholic schools must adopt prosocial behaviors and participate in social activities such as religious retreats, volunteerism, and school activities (Bryk et al., 1993; Irvine & Foster, 1996; Whitman, 2008). The CRN schools uniquely undertake the responsibility of preparing low-income youth academically, socially, and morally. Therefore, this article examines how the CRN influences the religious program of a Cristo Rey high school and how school staff integrates students’ lived experiences into religious activities.

### **Review of the Literature**

Catholic schools can adhere to the messages and teachings of Catholicism found in papal, conciliar, and Episcopal documents, which emphasize living a life in the likeness of Christ in the pursuit of a more just society. According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) (1998):

Catholic social teaching emerges from the truth of what God has revealed to us about himself. We believe in the triune God whose very nature is communal and social. God the Father sends his only Son

Jesus Christ and shares the Holy Spirit as his gift of love. God reveals himself to us as one who is not alone, but rather as one who is relational, one who is Trinity. Therefore, we who are made in God’s image share this communal, social nature. We are called to reach out and to build relationships of love and justice. (n.p).

In this manner, Catholic schools are expected to develop a community with their students, faculty, and parents to engage in the mission of social justice. For Catholic schools, the structure of community is an integral mechanism that asks Catholics to prioritize the community and relationships with others. In this manner, the Catholic Church and schools rooted in the Catholic tradition emphasize relationship building—in particular, with those in need.

In their analysis of Catholic schools, Cook and Simonds (2011) introduced a framework that utilizes relationships as the singular organizing principle. Their framework explains the role of relationship building as an integral charism of Catholic schools. As they have explained:

Relationships are at the heart of what it means to be a Catholic school. Each human being is called to be in a loving relationship with self, God, and others and is encouraged to see the interconnectedness of all creation. (Cook & Simonds, 2011, p. 323)

The framework makes clear the obligation Catholic schools have to facilitate relationship building for students with (a) themselves, (b) God, (c) others, (d) communities, and (e) creation. The relationship framework highlights relationship building as one of the most salient characteristics of Catholic schools, whose education includes students’ moral and social development.

Additionally, research on Catholic schools has demonstrated the unique role of teachers/counselors who serve to develop *multistranded relationships* with students (Aldana, 2012, 2014). Such relationships allow students to develop relationships in social activities or programs with educators that extend beyond the academic classroom and can help mitigate the distrust adolescents might have of adults or the tension between students and teachers. Extracurricular activities as well as religion courses and programs provide Catholic schoolteachers and counselors a forum in which to develop a nonacademic relationship where they can engage in the mission of Catholic schools to educate the whole child. Catholic educators, then, have a dual role

of both (a) developing *multistranded relationships* with students and (b) assisting students in their relationship building with themselves, others, God, and the community.

More broadly, research in education points to the important role of student-teacher relationships as a means through which to improve student motivation and learning (Davis, 2003). Nel Noddings (2013) has explicated how a pedagogy of care requires educators to step outside of their personal experience and move into the other's frame of reference. Teachers who demonstrate a caring pedagogy create positive academic environments for students by responding to the social contexts of students' lives (Moje, 1996). In these spaces, students feel authentically cared for, listened to, affirmed, and more willing to engage in tasks that emphasize learning over performing. Geneva Gay (2010) has explicated the role of caring as a central value embedded within culturally responsive teaching in which teachers believe that "marginalized students not only can but will improve their school achievement under the tutelage of component and committed teachers who act to ensure that this happens" (p. 59). Teachers uphold academic expectations for students, and ensure the schooling experience is moving students toward their academic goals (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Similarly, in his study of an elementary Catholic school, Christian Dallavis (2014) demonstrated how teachers, students, and parents viewed "culturally responsive caring" and academic goals as central to teacher's relationships with students. Conversely, research warns of superficial caring, the act of teachers developing relationships with students without maintaining high academic expectations (Dallavis, 2014; Ream, 2003).

Furthermore, culturally responsive teaching emphasizes the social and cultural dimension of learning that is necessary but that also disrupts the traditional dominant narrative that centers around White, middle-class experiences, and perspectives (Gay, 2010). The term *culturally responsive pedagogy* refers to "using the cultural knowledge of, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (Gay, 2010, p. 31). In action, culturally responsive pedagogy asks teachers to teach to and through the assets of students and is validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory. In this manner, culturally responsive pedagogy asks students to "develop the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become social critics who can make reflective decisions and implement their decisions in effective, personal, social, political, and economic action" (J. Banks, 1991, as cited in Gay, 2010, p. 36). This approach promotes

cooperation, community, and connectedness whereby students are encouraged to look out for one another and each other's success.

For students living in historically underserved communities—particularly communities at the center of unequal access to quality housing, education, and healthcare—teachers play a critical role in their social development. Segregated *ghettos* and *barrios* impose various levels of oppression on students from working-class backgrounds, and teachers working in these contexts should not ignore the material reality of these communities. Paulo Freire (2002) advocated for educators to employ a critical pedagogy. “The humanist, revolutionary educator cannot wait for this possibility to materialize. From the outset, her efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization” (p. 75). The relationship between students and teachers requires mutual respect and equality, whereby the role of the teacher is to stand in solidarity with working-class students, families, and communities (Darder, 2014) in an effort to empower students to see the world around them and to see their roles as agents of change. The role of the teacher is critical, as it foments “a sense of hope and promise, one that is directly tied to the study's participants' sense of themselves as capable agents of change” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, p. 141). In this case, the relationship between student and teacher asks for more than strong bonds between adult and child, but requires the teacher to understand the structural inequalities students face and want to change. Teachers and students work in solidarity, and as a result develop a more humanizing relationship. Regarding their study of youth participatory action, Jeff Duncan-Andrade and Ernest Morrell (2008) explained their role in the summer seminar program:

As seminar educators, we were also interested in changing the nature of the relationship between students and members of the city infrastructure (superintendents, police, local media personalities, parents, alumni of local schools). . . We wanted the students to develop respectful and agentive relationships with the adults in their city. (p. 123)

Beyond improving the structure of school, critical pedagogy asks teachers to help students develop relationships with their community.

The Cristo Rey Network (CRN) of schools was developed in the mid 1990s in response to the material realities of students and families living in Chicago (Kearney, 2008). The leaders of the network, motivated by Catholic

social teachings that recognize and prioritize the poor, developed the corporate work-study Catholic school model to make the Catholic school experience accessible for low-income families.

The present study explored the impact of the CRN on the religious program and, in turn, how the religious program used the lived experiences of Latino and African American students. In doing so, this study found a need for teachers at CRN schools to be aware of students' cultural and social identity and to develop an appropriate pedagogical response to strengthen students' academic, social, and spiritual identities.

### Methodology

This study highlighted the unique and collective experiences of Latino and African American male students attending St. Peter High School, drawing attention to their experience in religious programming. St. Peter High School (pseudonym) is a Catholic school located in a working-class community within a large metropolitan city in the southwestern portion of the US. In the early 1960s, the school was established in response to the need for a local Catholic high school to serve a predominantly African American and Latino community and offered college preparatory curriculum with the lowest tuition rates in the city. By the late 1990s, St. Peter faced financial debt, low student enrollment, and the possibility of closing its doors. In response, the Archdiocese invited the Society of Jesus to evaluate the school's outlook, which determined that the school could never exist under a tuition-funded model like most schools in the Archdiocese. By the early 2000s, the school transitioned into a Cristo Rey Network (CRN) school and established a work-study program for all students.

I employed ethnographic fieldwork methodology to understand the impact of the CRN on St. Peter through a variety of data points (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In this research, I examined (a) documents; (b) field notes of religious coursework and activities; and (c) transcripts of interviews with students, teachers, and school staff. This study was part of a one-year research project comparing the school culture and organization of two urban Catholic high schools serving a majority of low-income students. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do the Cristo Rey Mission Effectiveness standards impact the religious program and educational experience of St. Peter High School students?

2. What is the role of religion classes and activities in the development of relationships at St. Peter High School?

3. How does the intersection of students’ lived experiences, specifically their experiences in the corporate work-study and at school, inform their experience in religion coursework and activities?

Drawing from classroom ethnographic research, my study was rooted in the tradition of research that seeks to illuminate the social and cultural processes embedded in schools. In an effort to understand the ways in which young men of color engaged or disengaged in religious contexts, an ethnographic study, grounded in sociology and anthropology, allowed me to analyze how social contexts and interactions with other people mediated the experience of students in religious spaces. The use of multiple data sources facilitated a more robust analysis of the influential role the CRN had on the Catholic campus ministry program and the student experience.

### Data Collection

I drew from school documents, a website, and newspaper articles on St. Peter as well as stories from staff, students, and families to understand the historical context of the school. Given its participation in the CRN, I also gathered documents from the network communicated to the school. Additionally, I collected classroom assignments, fliers, announcements, pamphlets, and any other material I thought would deepen my knowledge of each school’s mission and culture.

Data collection also included ethnographic observations of ninth and 11th-grade religion classrooms, as well as of religious activities such as club meetings, religious assemblies, and prayer services. Religion classes were chosen because of their potential as spaces in which students are allowed to share their personal feelings about their identity and their relationships with others. Additionally, my experience in Catholic schools as a student and as a researcher prompted me to hypothesize that in these spaces, students would develop a bond to their community in concert with their burgeoning sense of social justice invigorated by their religious spirit. As a Latina professor who has attended mostly White, private schools, my positionality focused my attention on moments of tension when students would raise poignant questions about poverty and wealth, or share their experiences as a Person of Color in White-dominated spaces.

I interviewed 16 male students from St. Peter High School, asking how they perceived the culture of the school, and their academic, social, and work



experience at the school, including questions about their relationships with school staff and peers. I selected eight ninth-grade and eight 11th-grade—a mix of Latino and African American students with a range of academic and social engagement at the school. The semistructured one-hour interviews with students followed an interview protocol that also asked students about their participation in religion classes and activities and their understanding of social justice. I interviewed nine staff members including three religion teachers and two administrators. In preparation for the one-hour interviews, I created a general interview protocol for school staff that posed questions about school culture, students, and the role of the religious and corporate work-study programs. I used my Livescribe pen to record the conversations and enlisted the use of a transcriber. Once I received the transcripts of the interviews, I listened to each interview and ensured accuracy of the transcript I received.

### **Data Analysis**

For this study, school documents, field notes, and interview transcripts were coded at two levels: (a) predetermined codes such as peer-to-peer relationships, staff-to-student relationships, religious identity, and culturally relevant pedagogy; and (b) emergent codes that surfaced with regularity (racial identity, social justice, working class, living in poverty). In an effort to validate my findings, I utilized a concurrent triangulation strategy, which allowed me to use multiple data points to confirm findings in my study (Creswell, 2003). For example, an analysis of CRN documents was complemented by a review of interview transcripts to explicate the influence of the CRN on teacher pedagogy or school and classroom activities. Similarly, I used field notes in tandem with interview data to draw conclusions about how religion classes and activities facilitated relationships between students and staff. The analysis also revealed how participation in the CRN influenced staff members' perceptions of students but failed to shift religion teachers' pedagogy to respond to students' lived experience.

### **Findings**

#### **The Cristo Rey Network's Impact on St. Peter HS**

The Cristo Rey Network developed a set of Mission Effectiveness Standards (MES) to ensure that the 28 network schools would “establish a culture

of high-expectations by blending rigorous academics, four years of professional work experience, Catholic moral values, and support for students to and through college” (Cristo Rey Network, 2015b). These standards guide the school toward fidelity to the model as well as to the shared mission of the network. The Mission Effectiveness Standards are as follows:

1. Is explicitly Catholic in mission and enjoys Church approval.
2. Serves only economically disadvantaged students. The school is open to students of various faiths and cultures.
3. Is family centered and plays an active role in the local community.
4. Shall prepare all of its students to enter and graduate from college.
5. Requires participation by all students in the work-study program. All students must be 14 years by September 1st.
6. Integrates the learning present in its work program, classroom and extracurricular experiences for the fullest benefit of its student workers.
7. Has an effective administrative and board structure as well as complies with all applicable state and federal laws.
8. Is financially sound and at full enrollment the school is primarily dependent on revenue from the work-study program to meet operating expenses. In addition, the school maintains a comprehensive advancement program to ensure financial stability.
9. Supports its graduates’ efforts to obtain a college degree.
10. Is an active participant in the collaboration, support, and development of the Cristo Rey Network. (Cristo Rey Network, 2015b, n.p.)

Standards 1– 5 shape the student’s first-hand experience in a CRN school. Prior research has examined how Standard 4 is operationalized in the form of a *college-going culture* (Aldana, 2014). Standard 5, which requires high school students to participate in the corporate work-study program in order to pay for their tuition, is another cornerstone of the Cristo Rey experience. According to the school’s website, the work-study program provided

students with crucial hands-on, white collar work experience... As a result of working in the business environment, students acquire desirable job experience and marketable skills, develop a network of business contacts, and gain exposure to a variety of career opportunities. In addition, our students have demonstrated a strong work ethic that leads to increased self-esteem. (St. Peter High School website)

Interview transcripts demonstrated that students' work experiences ranged such that students worked at corporate offices, law and investment firms, universities and nonprofits in departments such as the mail room, filing room, guest services, and so forth. In an interview, Sergio described what the corporate work-study program meant to him.

The experience is wonderful. Being able to go and see this place, I'm talking about corporate America and experiencing it firsthand. People talk about corporate America so much that they actually don't get to see how people interact with each other or experience it before actually working there. (Sergio, 11th grader)

During interviews, students shared their work responsibilities and often talked about the people with whom they worked. Most (but not all) students shared a sense of eagerness and excitement about their corporate work setting, which was vastly different from their personal lives.

Standard 2 also influenced CRN schools, making it clear that only low-income students could attend. Without the corporate work-study program, St. Peter would have ceased to exist because students would not have been able to pay for a Catholic high school experience. In effect, Standard 2 created a segregated environment for students from low-income households. Although it is not the intention of this paper to interrogate the merits or issues with segregation, a litany of research problematizes the segregation of students especially when it is a historically underserved group (Gandara & Orfield, 2010; Lareau, 1989; Noguera, 2003, 2008; Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Orfield & Lee, 2005, 2006). Still, this article sought to explore how purposefully selecting only low-income students to attend a CRN school influenced the pedagogy of the religious program.

Standard 1 mandated CRN schools to create an academic experience rooted in a Catholic mission. Campus Ministry at St. Peter developed religious activities that would provide "opportunities for personal and spiritual growth and development" (school website). As a Jesuit school, St. Peter relied on key characteristics of Jesuit theology to inform its Campus Ministry program. Drawing on the tenet of *cura personalis*—a Latin term that translates as caring of the whole person—within Jesuit teachings, the school emphasized a holistic approach to education that met the social and academic needs of students. To this end, religion courses and activities helped students develop their spirituality and apply these values to their student life. The principal of the school, Dr. Jones explained:

Dr. Jones: It's being able to help students grow spiritually and form a relationship with God and to instill in them that they are loved and that they are special and unique. Those things can only have...positive effects on all aspects, like including academics. Motivation is certainly a big issue with our students and I think that those lessons can help in the motivation piece. ... I think that part of the religious education and spiritual dimension of the school helps remove some barriers from learning for our students.

Researcher: What kind of barriers?

Dr. Jones: A negative self image, perhaps. Believing that they're less than and therefore not worth it. Dealing with a difficult family situation, knowing that you can rely on God that you're not alone in it, that God is there, those types of things.

According to Dr. Jones, some students at St. Peter lacked motivation, and the religious program could help improve students' motivation and, in turn, disrupt deficit perceptions the young men might have of themselves. Similarly, Ms. Lee, a religion teacher, explained why the St. Peter students especially needed a holistic educational approach. She offered:

They're not going to pay attention to my class if they just watched somebody get shot right in front of them whether it was a year ago and they haven't talked about it. Or if their brother is smoking crack every night when they go because they don't know how deal with things. Or it's something more immediate like they don't have food on the table. There are things that these students are dealing with and need to be addressed. So, I think it does beg for like a holistic approach. (Ms. Lee, religion teacher)

For Dr. Jones and Ms. Lee, two outsiders to the community, their work at a CRN school made them explicitly aware of the material conditions students might endure from living in poverty. In my conversations with staff, their impetus for working at a CRN school stemmed from a desire to work with an underserved community that would allow them to use religiosity to help students. In the next sections, I present how the religious program at St.

Peter helped students develop relationships but failed to help students make religious connections to their lives.

### **Religion Program at St. Peter High School**

A review of interview transcripts and field notes evidenced that the staff at St. Peter was developing a religious course of study that helped students forge a relationship with God, others, and the community. Students took the following religion classes: Bible Studies, Catholicism, social justice, and world religions. In the ninth grade, students learned Catholic scripture and history. Eric, a ninth grader, explained how the religion class helped him understand the Bible and God:

We get to have discussions. We used to have debates, we haven't had one recently but we had a debate about God and how he was, how he was divine and human. And so, we had the class separated into, we had a group of divine and a group of human. And we just kinda debated ... why was he human, why was he divine. (Eric, ninth grader)

For Eric, the religion class offered him a space to better understand Catholicism. He enjoyed the debates and critical discussions the teacher facilitated because they forced them to think about Catholicism in an academic manner. However, Eric's opinions were not the norm.

The ninth- and 11th-grade classes at St. Peter encouraged students to think critically about religious history, but—by failing to engage—multiple groups of students regularly demonstrated that they did not take the class seriously. (Observations of religion classes revealed the same students sharing out in class or groups of students that were off task). For example, religious courses often included prayer with reflection prompts such as “Take a moment to be aware of God's presence. What are you most thankful for this past day? How do you want to live your life tomorrow so you can full participate in God's presence?” During interviews, students indicated that their religious reflections were something they did as performance. Students generally did not see the value in their religion class, which was evidenced by multiple answers of “nothing” when asked what they learned in religion class. Nonreligious students, particularly the African American students who identified as Non-Catholic, suggested that religion classes be replaced by other courses. Ms. Lee admitted that the religion department needed to work on making religion relevant to students' lives. She offered:

I think our challenge here is to get them to appreciate the academic part of being here and being college prep and all of that and then trying to get them to see that they are on ... a faith journey and we want to support them in that, in terms of integrating the two. I think that would be the next step ... I would love to have the opportunity to engage those two more but I feel like we're still just trying to like get them ... to have some sure footing in either or both and then we can talk about them together. You have glimpses of that I think in my Theology classes but in terms of like a systematic integration of those things, no; not yet. Not yet. Yet, I think is the key word.

Ms. Lee was aware that her department needed to provide students an opportunity to develop their relationship with God and make it a meaningful part of their life. Moreover, the lack of engagement in religion courses hindered students' opportunity to develop and strengthen their relationship with God, themselves, or their community.

The campus ministry program also organized spiritual retreats, assemblies, and liturgies for students. Students were required to attend yearly spiritual retreats as well as attend every service or religious activity. Interviews with students and staff illuminated the importance of religious retreats for the students. In particular, the retreats offered students a space in which to forge bonds with their peers. For example:

It was a good experience.... We played a lot of games and so that helped us interact more with each other. We had discussions, reflections, and we were divided into groups ... and we would go and do group projects. We actually did a play, or like, a little skit about a—about how people are fighting or there's a conflict and how to resolve it to show brotherhood. And so that was really good. And then we spent the night here. We watched a movie and then we spent the night here. We slept in classrooms and everyone was like, bonding, having fun. It was like a little sleepover. And then in the morning we had a mass or prayer service and that was really good. It was just a wonderful experience.  
(Carlos, ninth grader)

Carlos clearly described how beneficial it was for students to participate in a nonacademic space where they could learn about their peers and, hopefully, develop friendships. For the ninth-graders, the retreat focused on

“brotherhood” and creating a forum in which students could find commonalities with each other. The school also relied on the JEDIS (Jesuit Educated Disciples in Service)—students who had been selected by faculty to help plan and lead retreats. At the retreats, the students were called to share their life’s journey and struggles with other students. In doing so, they created a space in which students could candidly speak about their own spiritual experiences and provide a sense of emotional support for their peers. Mr. Villalobos described the retreats as a space beyond school where students could focus on such questions as: “What’s going on in my life between God and myself? And myself and all my friends and my family?” He explained, “And so that, that really helps them to open up, so that where they can share more of themselves with their brothers back here or on that school and they can continue to build that bond that they have with the other students.” Furthermore, the retreats afforded students who had already bonded a space to share their worries, frustrations, and experiences. Ms. Lee pointed to the importance of the 11th-grade retreat this past year, explaining,

I think a good example was ... the junior retreat... We had an activity where all the class ... had a talking piece. Like you go around and you share like what’s in your heart, what’s on your mind and all of this. I mean it was like verbal diarrhea, for lack of a better way to put it. These boys; we have at least five who talked about, thinking about or tried to commit suicide. ... Kids opened themselves about their parents who were heroin addicts and kids talk about being sexually abused when they were kids. It was like the floodgates. So, we heard that and those of us who are on the retreat were seriously disturbed—like the adults. We could not leave this like an open wound and we needed to do something and we needed to respond to them. So, we had a meeting and we all talked about it and we decided that we’d like have a part two of the retreat here on campus one afternoon. And that was really healthy; that kind of ended it on a positive note. But we all divvied up the students and we said like, “Hey, I’m close to this student” and we identified a long list of students that we are concerned about and we want to follow up with them. We went like one by one; have one at lunch for all the students and referred some of them for counseling. We figured out that some of them were just like in the moment. They felt really moved to share but they’re really okay. (Ms. Lee, religion teacher)

Ms. Lee later highlighted how well the religion department mobilized to check in with students after the retreat, and clearly the St. Peter staff used their relationships with students to check in with each of them, to ensure all students received the help they needed. In effect, the retreats allowed students not only to reflect on their own lives but also to develop stronger relationship with students and teachers.

In addition to the retreats, the Campus Ministry Program coordinated activities requiring students to help the community. For example, every semester, students were expected to engage in 40 hours of community service, which made up 10% of their religion grade. To ensure all students participated and completed their hours, the Christian Service Director monitored the community service students needed to complete. Students engaged in a variety of service projects such as the school-sponsored service field trips to social service centers or afterschool programs where they provided tutoring for the elementary school students next door to their campus. The school’s mission—“a man’ for others”—emphasized the importance of the service, and teachers asked students to engage in a discussion about what they had learned from the experience. In most cases, students shared their admiration of a community volunteers who demonstrated commitment though their service in churches and agencies. Beyond these relationships with community leaders, there was little evidence of students developing bonds with community members or those they served.

### Student Experience

My observations in religious classrooms revealed an absence of opportunity for students to explore the connection between their faith and their lived experiences. Toward the end of my study, I asked campus ministry staff about this cultural disconnect and was told that the department tried not to ask students to do this too much because students often highlighted tragic issues in their communities and at home. I asked students if they had insights as to the differences between religion courses, thinking perhaps it was a content issue. Eric, one of the few students who spoke with great detail about religious coursework offered:

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1 Any instances of noninclusive language are from the original text(s) and are not the preferred word choice of the Author or the Editors of the *Journal of Catholic Education*.



Freshman year, we learned more about the Bible itself and what it was and basic religious history that we should know. Then sophomore year, it got really intense. We started like—Mr. Garcia is an incredible teacher. We questioned the Bible every day, he would ask us questions. I'm not really sure, but it was an incredible experience because he's young and he's really dedicated to the church right now and everything, but he used to have girlfriends, he used to be heartbroken, he was a cross country runner. So he can all relate to it and he gave us—you could ask kids in my class, and I can see he was really good at it, like he'd make us write essays that would ask questions about life. (Eric, 11<sup>th</sup> grader)

For Eric, the religion class that stood out most for him was the class in which the instructor applied religion to his own personal experiences and modeled how faith entered his life. It is worth noting that Mr. Garcia was a man of color who was in the process of being formed as a Jesuit priest and related to many of the students I interviewed. These students benefitted from these discussions, which were culturally relevant to their own faith journey—an experience that aligned with the literature indicating that student learning improves when prior knowledge and cultural experiences are effectively integrated into the classroom (Howard, 2010).

St. Peter High School's mission reflected the value the school placed on creating young men with a commitment to their values: open to growth, intellectually motivated, spiritual, loving, committed to doing justice, and earning work experience. In this manner, the school structured an academic experience emphasizing Catholic social teaching and a commitment to social justice. Campus Ministry offered students an opportunity to reflect on their spirituality and social justice, but an infusion of students' cultural and personal experiences was absent. For example, St. Peter students were required to complete community service hours and participate in group reflections. In the following field note, I describe how a Jesuit volunteer facilitated a discussion with students about their community service. I sat with one of the groups and listened to the following exchange:

Mr. Creighton started with "I'm all about this. I am after all a Jesuit volunteer. I am all about social justice." He asked the group, "What did you expect of this experience?" Sergio shared how he served as a lecturer and a Eucharistic minister at his church. Sergio described the confirmation students he worked with as "gangsters" who kept looking at him and saying stuff. (Field note)

Mr. Creighton did not say anything after Sergio’s deficit-oriented comments, instead continuing with the discussion. Daniel then shared his experience as an afterschool tutor and complained about “crazy hyper-active kids.” Another student in the group, Oscar, repeatedly shook his head and interrupted Daniel, arguing that the younger students might be hyper after a long day of sitting at school. Mr. Creighton’s silence struck me as a missed opportunity to engage in important conversations with students about religious doctrine, demonstrating love and compassion (not judgment) for the poor, and working in solidarity with communities as a matter of social justice. To allow students to sit and develop negative portrayals of the people they were helping mirrored Freire’s warnings of false charity (2002). Those from working-class backgrounds in particular may fall into the behaviors of “sub-oppressors” and reify the same inequity and injustice to which they once were subjected (Freire, 2002).

Students working in the Cristo Rey corporate work-study program were exposed to a degree of wealth and privilege at their work sites, at times resulting in confusion about social mobility and poverty because they lacked the forum in which to discuss these issues. When I observed students working in downtown, for instance, students shared that they were impressed by the material comforts and affluence displayed by law firms and other offices. As an observer, I could recount how luxurious some of these firms were, with marble floors and breathtaking panoramic views of the city. Students recalled feeling nervous their first year, but that their work colleagues often helped them acclimate to a new setting. Still, at times, students did not know how to deal with the issues raised by working in such luxurious workplaces given they came from very different circumstances. The following is an excerpt from a field note of a conversation with David, an 11th-grader, recounting such an experience:

We stood in front of the brick bank building waiting for the bus to pick us up. After a couple of minutes the students and I began to talk about school and work. Then, David told me he wants to go to Georgetown. He said he went on a trip to Washington, DC and he really liked the university. I told him I went there and we shared stories about Georgetown. Afterwards, I asked him what he wants to do after college. David replied, “I’m not sure.” I continued and asked him if he wants to be a lawyer, since he is working at a law firm. He remained silent and shook his head to indicate no. He admitted, “I see how much money they

make. Like one guy I saw—made like the most at 600 dollars an hour.” Looking downwards toward the street, David shared his disbelief at the level of money another person could make, and how frustrated it made him feel to know that his parents work so hard and would never make money like that. As like he felt he needed to reiterate, David repeated that he did not want to work at a place like this in the future, but that he did want to go to college and get a good career. (Field note)

For most students, the lure of working in places of such opulence was simple, and they enjoyed the opportunities to make extra money during the summer and winter break. But David’s experience highlights the conflict some of the students felt when they were made aware of the wealth the people at their work sites enjoyed.

Observations of religion classes indicated that most teachers (but not all) lacked understanding of the lives of young men of color and were therefore unable to integrate their experiences into the classroom. During a discussion on social justice, the following exchange transpired:

Michael: What if you are called to make money?

Ms. Lee (asking the class): What does Christ call us to? Humility, poverty, embarrassment?

Gerry: Does Jesus want us to be poor?

Ms. Lee: (silence)

Michael: What if people are called to make money. Do you know people like that? Yeah, you gotta do whatcha gotta do?

Ms. Lee: What about Ignation spirituality? I mean, money is not bad, you should be chasing what gets you closer to God.

Michael: What if money brings you closer to God?

Ms. Lee: What if wealth or a life of poverty led you to God?

Michael: I mean I feel like Ignatius is just another dude that comes up with ideas, and I don't have to follow what he says, I come up with ideas. I do.

Ms. Lee: As long as you are happy and I am here to tell you about what Ignatius' ways, but you don't have to follow what he says. I hope you think about it, but you can do whatever you want. (Field note)

As I sat in the classroom, I expected to hear Ms. Lee ask students to respond to Michael's question because all of the students in a CRN school would have some relative experience with poverty. Instead, Ms. Lee lauded Dorothy Day and other religious leaders, who had the privilege of choosing to be poor when they helped others—but still the students seemed conflicted about their role in this kind of social justice. As Paulo Freire (2002) has suggested, educators and leaders “approach the peasant or urban masses with projects which may correspond to their own view of the world, but not to that of the people” (p. 94). Michael openly dissented to the teachings of living a life of poverty, whereas Gerry pushed the issue further by asking if Jesus really wanted them to be poor. I wondered if Ms. Lee had considered what social justice means to a group of black and brown male youths who, at this point in their lives, had no choice but to live in poverty. For Ms. Lee, who had admitted earlier that she was used to living a comfortable lifestyle, her failure to integrate the students' perspectives on living in poverty left students with more questions about Catholic social teachings. There was no mention of the Church's Preferential Option for the Poor or any opportunity for students to critically examine poverty as multidimensional. A critical exploration of these issues would certainly have sparked students' motivation to disrupt this trend, allowing them to see themselves as change agents not only for their individual outcomes, but also for their community.

### Conclusion

As I reflected on the data presented, I identified a tension in the ways that the corporate work-study program influenced the schooling experience—particularly the religious program on the St. Peter campus. As a member

of the Cristo Rey network, St. Peter segregated students from economically disadvantaged households, which certainly influenced how school staff characterized the material and spiritual needs of the students. Although the corporate work-study program certainly benefitted students with tuition support and, in effect, a Catholic private education, concomitantly the work-study experience prompted students to raise religious and philosophical questions centered on wealth/poverty and Catholic social teachings. The study demonstrates the need for religious education in CRN schools to incorporate students' lived social and cultural experiences so that students can develop stronger relationships with God and the community.

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*Ursula S. Aldana is an Assistant Professor in the Catholic Educational Leadership (CEL) Program at the University of San Francisco. Her research focuses on K-12 teaching and leadership with regard to issues of equity and access for racially/ethnically and linguistically diverse students. She is currently working on research at the intersection of the Latina/o experience in Catholic education. Correspondence regarding this article can be sent to Dr. Aldana at [ualdana@usfca.edu](mailto:ualdana@usfca.edu)*