



October 2017

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### Recommended Citation

Maney, J. S., King, C., & Kiely, T. J. (2017). Who Do you Say You Are: Relationships and Faith in Catholic Schools. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 21 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2101032017>

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## Who Do You Say You Are? Relationships and Faith in Catholic Schools

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*This study aimed to evaluate and articulate what makes Catholic schools special and effective by measuring culture and climate in five Catholic high schools and two Catholic elementary schools in a large metropolitan area in the Midwest United States. The seven schools represented a variety of student demographics, location, and size of school. Findings of this study included: the Catholic identity of schools must become an intentional aspect of the planning, orientation, training, and evaluation of the faculty and administration; faculty-student relationships are rarely measured regarding their effectiveness in bolstering academic achievement or Catholic mission effectiveness; cultural awareness and cultural responsive pedagogy must become a component of school orientation if not teacher education; and teacher expectations impact the student-teacher relationship.*

### Keywords

Culture, Relationships, Faith, Catholic, Schools

There are many reasons parents decide to send their children to a Catholic school. Some of these reasons include faith formation, academic excellence, discipline and values, and a safe environment. In a Catholic school context, the expectation is that the school aims to create a climate in which teachers assist students in their development as unique individuals, as well as to develop healthy moral attitudes. School climate is the “quality and character of school life” and is “predictive of students’ ability to learn and develop in healthy ways” (National School Climate Center, 2014). Therefore, an

essential aspect of a Catholic education is the relationship between students and teachers. In this study, we examined Catholic schools serving ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse students and families, as well as a large number of non-Catholic students. Parents of all backgrounds, reportedly sent their children to Catholic schools for the reasons listed above, with particular emphasis on academic excellence and faith formation.

Writer Margaret Wheatley (2002) pens, “Relationships are all there is. Nothing exists in isolation.” In a vision document from a United States Catholic Conference on Catholic youth ministry, effective ministry with adolescents is said to be built on relationships (1997). What, then, constitutes the additional opportunity of Catholic schools to build on the unique relationship between teacher and student? According to Cook and Simonds (2013), Catholic schools are called to “embody an identity and charism that make a unique and meaningful contribution to our Church and society” (p. 319) and should “set a new course for the future by making Catholic schools have a unique religious charism that provides a purifying and balancing of human relationships” (p. 322). To become places where lives are changed, Cook and Simonds argue that human relationships must be the “keystone to constructing Catholic schools” (p. 324).

Marzano (2003) emphasized that teachers serve an essential role in helping students succeed. Research on students’ perspectives of teacher-student relationships finds that there are specific teacher behaviors that increase academic motivation and engagement, as well as feelings of belonging and importance. Tobbell and O’Donnell (2013) proposed that the two types of teacher-student relationships are interpersonal relationships and learning relationships. To facilitate learning, “students and teachers need to negotiate enabling interpersonal relationships which can then lead to learning relationships, allowing... movement towards more complex activity” (p. 15). In addition, Marsh (2002, p. 162) identified five teacher behaviors that middle and high school students see as key to creating positive student/teacher relationships for learning:

1. Friendly and flexible approach (e.g., respectful speech with students, smiling, greeting students, give choice and freedom in learning, use of humor, being happy).
2. Enthusiastic and engaging delivery (e.g., confident and focused, uses a range of learning activities, puts effort into preparing lessons, asks students how they like to learn).
3. Noticing talent (e.g., recognizes and comments on good work, listens, asks for students’ opinions).

4. Personal interactions (e.g., personal questions, individual conversations, checks for understanding, say things that show students the teacher knows/understands them, teacher shares some interests outside of work, notice and give extra work when students complete work ahead of others or have been absent, ask about students' outside interests).
5. Effective classroom management (e.g., clear control and direction, discipline not forced but natural, few unreasonable rules, talks quietly/calmly when students do something wrong, creates relaxed atmosphere, gets students involved, treatment of students is equal and equitable).

Tobbell and O'Donnell's (2013) study of students in sixth through ninth grade surfaced important themes that students viewed as impacting teacher-student interpersonal relationships. One theme in particular, *courtesy*, closely reflected a productive teacher behavior described by Marsh (2013). Courtesy, a demonstration of respect, is formational in developing interpersonal relationships. A second theme is *rules and resistance*. Students expect rules, and students understand that they are to observe rules. However, "It was the inconsistent application of those rules, the perception that certain rules were unfair, and in the sheer number of rules" (p. 17) that resulted in students perceiving interpersonal relationships with teachers as negative.

Congruent with the findings above, during Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam's (2013) interviews with high school students, teacher-student relationships were generally characterized by students as "the connections that emerge when a student (or group of students) initiates conversations with a teacher during or after class that revolve around curriculum or their outside lives" (p. 28). Positive teacher-student relationships that exhibit encouragement and support by the teacher often translate into greater motivation and engagement in academic behaviors from students who feel as though they should reciprocate the respect and effort the teacher is investing in them. Examples of this include, a teacher quickly learning students' names, patiently working with individual students until they grasp what is being taught, acknowledging a student's concern about grades, asking about students' interests, relating class material to students' lives or providing extra help outside of class. Further, some students "see entrusting teachers with their intellect as a reward for a teacher's display of care" (p. 34).

For others, the teacher-student relationship is more reciprocal and conditional. Giles (2011) proposed that teacher-student relationships can be one of three types. First are those that appear to matter to both the teacher and student. The teacher shows care and concern for the student, connects relationally, empathizes, and shares a personal approach to working with him or her. In this case, the student reciprocates these relational qualities. Second are those relationships in which the student senses indifference from a teacher. This type of relationship exists when the student perceives the teacher to be vague, indecisive, too “laid back,” not actively engaged or connected to students. It is the perceived “sustained indifference” of the teacher that presents the problem (p. 87). Third are those relationships in which either the teacher or student feels vulnerable or unsafe. This situation develops when either the teacher or the student does not reciprocate caring for the other, resulting in distance to protect oneself in the relationship.

Certainly, there is convincing evidence that students’ engagement and investment in their learning and healthy development is related to the kind and quality of frequent interactions they have with their classroom teachers. Since part of the mission of Catholic schools is to be engaged in students’ lives in order to develop the whole child, one could expect a greater connection between teachers and students in Catholic schools.

### **Role of Faith Formation in Developing Relationships and Student Success**

Catholic schools have the opportunity to develop human beings by infusing into the culture of the school a moral and spiritual life. One of the supportive components in creating this character building environment is the relationship between student and teacher (Lickona, 2000). Part of this moral obligation can be found in a social justice context, which can serve as a framework for teacher educators to address injustice in educational settings (Collopy & Bowman, 2012).

Catholic social teaching is based on the idea that every human being is created in the image of God and redeemed by Jesus Christ, and therefore is invaluable and worthy of respect as a member of the human family. The Church, and, subsequently, educational programs have the God-given mission and the unique capacity to call people to live with integrity, compassion, responsibility, and concern for others. (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 1998, para. 5)

In 2005, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) further affirmed that the intellectual development of Catholic school students and their development as Christians go hand-in-hand. Catholic schools must provide young people with an “academically rigorous and doctrinally sound program of education” (USCCB, 2005, p. 3).

The role of the teacher is pivotal in setting the tone in both the school and the classroom (Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE], 1998; USCCB, 1972). In their relationships with students, teachers can exert a positive influence by respecting and loving students and by being good role models (Lickona, 2000). Teachers should care about their students even before they come into the classroom but certainly after, as that will impact the learning and development. As shared in Cook and Simonds (2011), the Congregation for Catholic Education described how relationships must be the foundation of the educational process in Catholic schools:

During childhood and adolescence a student needs to experience personal relations with outstanding educators, and what is taught has greater influence on the student’s formation when placed in a context of personal involvement, genuine reciprocity, coherence of attitudes, lifestyles and day-to-day behavior. (Cook & Simonds, 2011, p. 323)

Flowing from schools’ missions and individual charisms are several indicators of a strong teacher-student relationship and focus on faith formation of students. One of these indicators is the accurate use of Christian language describing the relational aspects of the school’s charism (Dallavis, 2014). An authentic correlation between the mission language and the relational posture of the teacher towards the student sets a tone that affects the student-teacher relationship. Hence both students and teachers may share similar perceptions of aspects of teacher-student relationship and Catholic identity development. Ideally, the majority of students feel challenged and respected by their teachers, teachers know about students’ lives inside and outside of school, and faith development becomes a factor in the strength of these teacher-student relationships.

To become places where lives are changed, and for Catholic schools to impact the lives of students, human relationships must be the key component to developing Catholic schools with vibrant educational environments (Cook, 2011). If the relationship between teacher and student is critical not

just to learning, but also to the development of a student's character, then the relationship between the teacher and the student is foundational (Lickona, 2000).

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationships between Catholic school teachers and their students, as well as parents' perceptions of the school, in schools with significant racial and religious diversity. Specifically, we wanted to look at the difference between how students and teachers assessed the quality of their relationships in and out of the classroom on both academic development and faith formation.

### Method

This study was conducted with seven Catholic schools in a large metropolitan area in the Midwest as part of an Archdiocesan assessment project. The participating schools included five high schools and two middle schools. The student population in three of the schools was predominantly African American and non-Catholic; one school almost exclusively served Latino/a students; and all schools accepted some percentage of students funded by state assistance. Four of the schools, including the two middle schools involved in this study, experienced a significant shift in the makeup of their student body in the years immediately preceding this study. The shift resulted in fewer parish members, fewer White families, and fewer middle-class students.

### Participants

Participants in the study included instructional staff from each of the schools, students in grades 6-12, and parents of students from each school.

**Instructional staff.** Instructional staff (N=183) from the seven schools were surveyed and included teachers (n=158) and instructional support staff (n=25). Twenty-six were middle school instructional staff and 157 were high school instructional staff. More than 99% of instructional staff identified their racial background as White.

**Students.** All students enrolled in grades 6, 7, and 8, as well as students enrolled in sophomore (grade 10) and junior (grade 11) level courses were chosen for the sample, resulting in a total of 1,225 students in grades 6-12 participating in the study. Table 1 presents demographics for the student participants participant demographics).

Table 1

*Participant Demographics, Student Participants (N=1,225)*

Variable	n	%
Grade		
6	70	5.7
7	31	2.5
8	38	3.1
9	9	<0.1
10	533	43.5
11	468	38.2
12	48	3.1
Sex		
Female	650	53.1
Male	554	45.2
Race/Ethnicity		
Black	328	28.6
Latino	346	28.2
White	405	33.1
Asian <sup>1</sup>	54	4.4
Native American	31	2.5
Other	49	4.0
Religious Affiliation		
Catholic		
Non-Catholic	575	46.9

*Note.* <sup>1</sup> Includes Asian, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander

**Parents.** A total of nine parent focus groups were conducted, at least one at each school. A total of 89 parents participated in these groups. Two groups were conducted in Spanish. Backgrounds of the participating parents by identified race include: White (n = 41 [46%]); African American/Black (n = 20 [23%]); and Hispanic/Latino (n = 28 [31%]).



## Measures

**WE TEACH and WE LEARN surveys.** The researchers contracted with Successful Practices Network (SPN) to deliver the WE TEACH and WE LEARN surveys (SPN, 2015). These two surveys assess teacher's and students' perceptions of the school's rigor, relevance, relationships, and school leadership. An optional scale, Catholic/Christian Identity, which included questions on Catholic instructional practices, was added to both surveys for this study. Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree).

For the WE LEARN Student Survey, reliability estimates for each construct, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, were between .83 and .84 (Byrd, 2011a). For the WE TEACH teacher survey, reliability estimates for each construct, as measured by Cronbach's alpha, were between .81 and .88 (Byrd, 2011b). For both surveys, principal component analyses and reliability indices indicated that survey items measure a single dimensional construct (e.g., rigor, relevance, relationships, leadership or Catholic/Christian Identity), which supports construct validity. There is support for discriminant validity, for both versions of the survey, meaning that items that are not expected to be related, are shown not to be related (Byrd, 2011a; Byrd, 2011b).

For the purposes of this particular study, only the Relationship and Catholic/Christian Identity items were examined. The WE TEACH survey included 11 items on relationships and 14 items on Catholic/Christian Identity. The WE LEARN survey included 16 items on relationships and 14 items on Catholic/Christian Identity. For reporting the results, WE TEACH items answered by instructional staff (teachers) were indicated by the label TQ and WE LEARN items answered by students were indicated by the label LQ.

**Parent focus group questions.** Parent focus group questions related to relationships included: How do the teachers in this school: (a) Show they care about your child? (b) Demonstrate they teach well? (c) Support your child? (d) Create an environment where your child can learn? Questions related to Catholic identity included: (a) Why did you decide to enroll your child in this school? (b) How important was it to send your child to a Catholic school in order to develop your child to be a better person? (c) How important was the school's Catholic identity? (d) How important was the quality of education?

## Procedures

Surveys were taken electronically with links provided by Successful Practices Network. All surveys were submitted for scoring to Successful Practices Network. Aggregate data were reported by Successful Practices Network in percentages of those who agreed and strongly agreed with each survey item. A comparison guide provided by Successful Practices Network was utilized to compare related items on the Relationship and Catholic Instructional Practices scale that were answered by both teachers and students. The individual test constructs under examination, Relationships and Catholic/Christian Identity, for both the WE TEACH and WE LEARN surveys contain items that are not comparable or do not focus on teachers' perceptions of student or students' perception of teachers. Therefore, to examine teacher-student specific items, the WE TEACH/WE LEARN survey data were analyzed using Fisher's exact test (FET), a common method used to determine if there is statistical significance of an association between two classifications of data. The test is most commonly used with 2x2 matrices, similar to our data samples. In our study, when differences between teachers' and students' responses were statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ), the null hypothesis that teachers and students share similar perceptions of teacher-student relationships and focus on students' faith formation was rejected. Data for the middle school were analyzed separately from that of the high school. The decision to use aggregated data to analyze the high schools was made in spite of the schools' different demographic makeup to protect the schools from being identifiable.

Parent focus groups were conducted immediately after survey data was collected. Themes were coded along definitions of quality Catholic schools, or academic excellence, faith formation, discipline and values, and feelings of safety. A combined follow-up meeting was held with the teachers and administrators from the two middle schools to share and discuss the survey results. Follow up meetings at each of the five high schools were held with the leadership team to disseminate the survey and parent focus group data.

## Results

Teacher and student responses were compared on pairs of indicators from the two reports for teaching questions (TQ) and learning questions (LQ). Results of the testing showed that the differences in perceptions about teacher-student relationships were significant with teachers endorsing items about the existence of relationship indicators more often than both middle and high school students, with the largest discrepancy seen compared with high school students (Table 2).

Table 2

*Compared Items Indicative of Strength of Teacher-Student Relationships*

Indicators	Middle School			High School		
	% Agree- ment	<i>SD</i>	FET	% Agree- ment	<i>SD</i>	FET
Staff respect students.	85.5	7.78	0.05*	88.8	12.34	0.01*
Teachers respect me.	63.0	3.54		67.0	7.42	
I am aware of my students' interests outside of school.	85.5	7.78	0.01*	75.6	17.07	0.01*
My teachers know my interests outside of school.	38.0	0.0		30.6	4.77	
I know my students' academic interests and goals.	86.5	19.09	0.07	82.0	19.0	0.01*
My teachers know my academic interests and goals.	66.5	7.77		46.0	9.06	
Students talk about academic problems and concerns with me.	74.5	10.61	0.82	80.4	17.59	0.01*
I can share my academic problems and concerns with my teachers.	69.0	4.24		69.8	5.07	
I know what my students are passionate about.	75.5	21.92	0.01*	75.8	10.08	0.01*
My teachers know what I love to do outside of school.	34.0	2.83		27.6	5.55	

\*Statistically significant at  $p < .05$  or  $p < .01$ .

Three items on the WE LEARN survey without a comparable teacher item focused on the relationship between students only or teachers only (e.g., I have lots of friends at school; My classmates encourage me to do my best; I encourage other students to do their best; and, Teachers respect each other). Five of the 11 relationship items on the WE TEACH survey focused on students' relationship with each other and teacher relationships with colleagues and administrators (e.g., Bullying is a problem at this school; I can freely express my opinions and concerns to the administration; Staff know the personal interests of each other; I feel isolated from my colleagues; and, My colleagues are a source of encouragement for me). Other items addressed the teacher-student relationship, but did not have a comparable teacher or student item (Table 3).

Table 3  
Other Relationship Scale Items from WE LEARN and WE TEACH Surveys

Indicators	Middle School		High School	
	% Agree- ment	SD	% Agree- ment	SD
Teachers care about me.	80.0	5.66	72.6	8.11
Teachers care if I participate in classes.	91.0	2.83	75.0	3.81
I respect teachers.	85.5	2.12	82.2	2.68
My teachers are enthusiastic about what they teach.	78.0	9.19	64.8	8.79
My teachers often let me know how I am doing in their classes.	71.5	7.78	63.2	9.36
Good citizenship is rewarded in this school.	52.5	13.44	45.0	19.86
I have a teacher I can talk to about personal issues.	35.0	15.56	49.5	3.99
This school reaches out to all students to meet their individual needs.	85.5	7.78	63.0	14.4

Testing showed that the differences in perception of teachers' focus on students' faith formation were significant with students more often endorsing items about their own perceptions of the importance of faith formation than teachers (Table 4). Two items from each the WE LEARN survey (e.g., I am glad that I go to a school that teaches religion; and, I encourage other students to come to this school) and WE TEACH survey (e.g., I am happy to teach at a school that values and teaches religion; and Teachers accept responsibility for promoting and recommending the school) did not have a comparable teacher-student item.

Table 4

*Compared Items Indicative of Focus on Catholic/Christian Identity and Faith Formation*

Indicators	Middle School			High School		
	% Agreement	SD	FET	% Agreement	SD	FET
I lead students in prayer each day.	73	0.0	0.428	35.8	9.76	0.01*
Teachers lead us in prayer every day.	81	8.49		57.6	8.68	
I encourage student participation in service projects.	90	14.14	0.056	73.0	22.57	0.637
I am encouraged to participate in school service projects.	69	4.24		71.0	11.6	
I focus on the faith development of students.	81	1.41	0.249	53.4	3.71	0.932
My teachers are interested in my development as a person of faith.	68.5	14.85		52.8	4.44	
We have strong parental support for the mission of this school.	18	12.73	0.01*	59.2	26.66	0.662
My parents are pleased with how my school promotes Catholic/Christian teachings.	70	7.07		61.0	8.35	

Table 4 (Cont.)

*Compared Items Indicative of Focus on Catholic/Christian Identity and Faith Formation*

Indicators	Middle School			High School		
	% Agree- ment	<i>SD</i>	FET	% Agree- ment	<i>SD</i>	FET
I believe students have oppor- tunities here that they would not have in a non-Catholic/ Christian school.	76.5	4.95	0.124	82.4	18.5	0.01*
I have opportunities here that I would not have in non- Catholic/Christian schools.	60.5	12.02		68.6	10.78	
Students know the value of attending Mass and prayer services as part of Catholic/ Christian school.	55.5	12.02	0.01*	55.6	11.52	0.01*
I see the value of attending Mass and prayer services as part of a Catholic/Christian school.	78.5	9.19		66.8	6.46	
I help students make decisions based on their values.	81.0	1.41	0.473	77.2	15.90	0.01*
There are adults at this school who help me make decisions based on my values.	73.0	9.90		67.4	3.05	
I use examples from religion in my teaching.	90.0	14.14	0.01*	59.4	10.74	0.01*
Teachers use examples from religion in your teaching.	51.0	21.21		42.4	7.80	
I believe I help students to be better people.	93.5	9.19	0.05*	86.0	20.41	0.01*
I believe being at this school helps me be a better person.	74.5	10.61		65.6	11.72	

Table 4 (Cont.)

*Compared Items Indicative of Focus on Catholic/Christian Identity and Faith Formation*

Indicators	Middle School			High School		
	% Agree- ment	SD	FET	% Agree- ment	SD	FET
This school makes every effort to recognize and celebrate each student's interests and individual abilities.	65.5	2.12	1.00	70.4	15.65	0.01*
My God-given gifts, talents, and interests are recognized by my teachers.	66.5	7.78		43	8.28	
Parents value the school's religious instruction of their children.	30	4.24	.01*	62.2	22.75	0.435
My parents are glad that I go to a school that teaches religion.	78.5	19.09		59	9.72	
I encourage students to care about those in need in the larger community.	90	14.14	0.205	82.4	24.6	0.01*
We are taught to care about those in need in the larger community.	76.5	14.85		72	11.18	

*Note.* \*Statistically significant at  $p < .05$  or  $p < .01$ .

Other survey items that are a reflection of the teacher-student relationship from the section on rigor provide additional information about teachers' knowledge or expectations of their students, as well as; how they perceive struggling students are supported. These items also reflect students' perceptions about the support they receive from teachers when struggling academically (See Table 5).

Table 5

*Other Indicators of Strength of Teacher-Student Relationships*

Indicators	Middle School		High School	
	% Agree- ment	SD	% Agree- ment	SD
Struggling and disengaged students receive the support necessary to be successful.	55.5	12.02	49.6	14.91
This school gives up on struggling students. <sup>1</sup>	0.0	0.0	9.0	5.79
If students are given more challenging work, they do it.	47.0	10.61	46.36	23.88
This school has high expectations of all students	72.0	26.87	67.4	17.97
When I struggle in class, I receive the support I need to be successful.	81.0	5.66	70.4	3.58
When I struggle in class lessons, teachers give up on me.	20.0	5.66	18.8	2.39

*Note.* <sup>1</sup> Only teachers for grades 9-12 responded to this survey item.

### Parent Focus Groups

Two themes emerged as being the focus among parents, that being academic excellence and faith formation. In some cases, the theme of values was discussed in the context of faith.

**Academic excellence.** A sample of comments from the focus groups provided additional insight into a theme of academic excellence. While some parents, many of them white, felt that their children were receiving a high-quality education, others, many of them identifying as non-white, had different experiences. One white parent said, “Rules are consistent, reading and math are really strong, and there’s good communication between us and the teachers. In fact, they remembered my older kids’ names long after they left.” However, a common theme among the African American parents in the focus groups indicated a concern that rules and procedures were being explained clearly to their children, that their children did not get enough



homework, and teachers often did not return their phone calls. One African American parent indicated that her child was advanced in math but was forced to sit through repetitious lessons for students needing extra time.

**Faith formation.** Overwhelmingly, Black and Latino/a parents wanted even more Catholic teaching than what they were experiencing and that it was the school's religious charism that was the primary motivation for attending. Parents expressed a high value for faith infused during the classroom instruction and in the school setting in general. For example, a parent who identified as Catholic and Latino stated: "You cannot teach about morality and not speak about God; I want my son to grow up knowing God." An African American parent, who does not identify as Catholic, stated:

I chose this school BECAUSE of its Catholic teachings. I appreciate my kids getting a religious foundation and I love that they come home and teach us how to say the Catholic prayer before dinner. But I also don't feel it's Catholic enough. I love the school but I would like even more teaching on morals, values, and religious traditions.

Another African American parent shared,

I'm an agnostic and [this high school] gives my son something I can't because my experience is tainted in my life experience as a young single mother from a difficult background. I see so many kids that don't have faith in themselves or in anything above to help them through struggles and fight the bad influences that will lead them astray and I want my son to know that God will be there when no one else will be.

### Discussion

The information gleaned from students about how they perceive their relationships with adults in the school, effectiveness of instruction, and overall school environment provides school leaders and teachers with a powerful tool for understanding what students believe about the school and for making meaningful sustainable school improvement (SPN, 2015). This study showed significant discrepancies between perceptions of the relationships that exist between the teachers and students surveyed. Most notable is the misperception between the teachers' perceived level of familiarity with their middle or high school students and the students' perceptions of how well their teachers

know them (See Table 2). This disconnect is significant and could potentially affect academic performance. When teachers do not have rapport with students, they may struggle to make academic work interesting and relevant to their audience, which affects student engagement and achievement. In addition, potential learning or help-seeking may be impeded for some students, as approximately one-third indicated they do not feel comfortable addressing their teachers regarding their academic concerns.

On their website, Successful Practices Network's shares some national aggregate data from *Rigor, Relevance and Relationships in Today's Schools*. Two such relevant data points are that 29% of high school students nationally agreed that teachers know their interests outside of school, and 65% of middle school students nationally agreed that they share academic problems or concerns with teachers. Comparably, this research showed 31% of high school students reported their teachers know their interests outside of school. Approximately 69% of both middle and high school students share academic problems and concerns with teachers. Surprisingly, our Catholic school students' assessment of their relationship with their teachers was similar to the national sample.

A full two-thirds of teachers in this study agreed that there are high expectations of students, students receive challenging work, and students are encouraged to use critical thinking skills to solve problems. Yet, 47% of the teachers reported a perception that students would do more challenging work if given (See Table 5). Successful Practices Network's national aggregate data showed that 52% of teachers agreed that students would do more challenging work; and, 51% of high school students agreed they would do more challenging work. Therefore, our teacher population was not significantly different from the national sample. However, when challenging students academically is associated with stronger teacher-student relationships (March, 2003; Bernstein-Yamashiro's & Noam's, 2013), one might expect Catholic school teachers to have developed relationships with students that results in more students investing in their learning by doing more challenging work inside and/or outside the classroom.

As previously mentioned, a change in the student population at about half of the schools resulted in fewer parish members, fewer white families, and fewer middle-class students. Consequently, students with different racial, socioeconomic and religious backgrounds compromise the majority of the student body. In several instances, because of this demographic change in the classroom, teachers described the current environment with a note of

grieving a past that had changed. Given the fact that 67% of students who participated in this study identified as students of color, and almost 100% of the teachers surveyed identified as White, one could propose that a lack of cultural understanding between teacher and student contributed to students' perceptions of how well their teachers knew them. According to Gay (2001), understanding the cultural values, traditions, communication, learning styles, contributions and relational patterns are critical for teachers because they directly impact teaching and learning. Putting the teacher-student relationship in another context, another possible interpretation is that both teachers' and students' personal biases impacted the relationship. "Relational experiences accumulate within each person's historicity and, in so doing, influence each person's becoming and how they view the world" (Giles, 2011). Prior experiences or a lack of experience with people of a different race may have influenced perceptions of relationships, particularly for racially and economically diverse students who were more likely to have witnessed or experienced prejudice by those of the dominant culture. This may be helpful in understanding the different perceptions between middle class white parish families and families of color.

### **Catholic/Christian Identity and Faith Formation**

Students expressed a high value of faith in classroom instruction and in the school setting in general, and indicated that parents supported the school's mission and valued the faith practices within the school. However, 18% of middle school teachers agreed that there was strong parental support for the mission and 30% agreed that parents value religious instruction (Table 4). This finding is incongruent with what students expressed about their and their parents' perceptions of the importance of being in an environment focused on Catholic teachings. Almost all parents in the focus groups, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or whether or not they received state assistance said that they chose a Catholic school first and foremost because of its Catholic-Christian values. The groups identified the faith identity of the school as being the driving factor in their decision on a school.

The character development of all students is one of the many responsibilities of Catholic school teachers (Lickona, 2000). Integral to the moral and spiritual development of youth are positive relationships between teachers and students demonstrated by the acknowledgment of students' interests and abilities. Students and teachers reported significantly different perceptions on items regarding the personal development of the student and encourag-

ing students to be the best person they can be. Fewer middle and high school students agreed that being at the school helped them be a better person. Also, fewer high school students agreed with teachers about teachers recognizing students' "God-given gifts, talents and interests," giving help with making value-based decisions, or promoting caring for others in the community.

### **Implications**

The WE TEACH/WE LEARN survey reports gave these schools a unique chance to look at their school through the eyes of the instructional staff and students. The purpose of these reports was to provide a context for exploring how well instructional staff believed they were challenging their students and helping them connect what they were learning to the world around them. In addition, they helped determine how instructional staff viewed the relationships they have in school, and how much they know about the goals of the school. It allowed them to explore how students felt they were being challenged, whether or not they were relating what they learned to broader contexts, and what they thought about the relationships they have in school. Lastly, the surveys, as well as the focus group responses, provided a lens into how staff, students and parents perceived the importance of a Catholic education and a Catholic school. By exploring and discussing these results, we hoped they would gain valuable insights into the instructional leadership, school culture and overall educational effectiveness of their school.

Administrators of the schools involved in this study registered a conscious effort to address the racial and ethnic differences among the students and an effective integration of Catholic teaching into the school's efforts. When school-specific results were shared with each set of school leaders, the findings of the disconnection between teacher-student relationships as well as the value of Catholic identity on the part of students and their families, was a surprise to many. In the schools with the greatest differences between teachers' racial and religious background and that of their students, it was seen that racial and ethnic differences (or population shifts) were not reconfigured into the school's Catholic culture. Reports from educators and students registered a less effective integration of Catholic teaching and more superficial relationships between teachers and students.

Middle school teachers' comments during the follow-up focus groups reaffirm their feelings of disconnection. For example, one middle school teacher stated: "There's a culture clash; their [the students'] priorities are different." Another eighth-grade teacher theorized: "Relationships may be more

important to them [the students] vs. teachers as we have no time for that—no approach is better or worse, maybe it’s just a socioeconomic difference.” Other teachers focused their comments on disconnects specifically related to Catholic identity. For example, one teacher stated: “Yes, maybe our families [that are enrolled in the school] value Catholic identity regarding morality and Jesus, but they don’t participate in Mass, which is what WE [the teachers] define as Catholic.” Another teacher noted that “Sometimes we don’t even know what their [students and their parents] religious affiliation is.” Other teachers were more critical. For example, a sixth grade teacher stated “Their [the students’ and families’] idea of Catholic identity is uniforms, discipline, uniforms, versus our [the teachers’] idea—it’s disheartening. They don’t even sing.” And, one high school teacher stated: “There is no connection between [students’] behavior and the gospel.”

### Recommendations

Taking the findings presented and discussed in the previous sections in tandem with the description of Catholic schools as shaped by Communion and Community found in the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Schools* (Ozar & Weitzel-O’Neill, 2012), several recommendations emerge.

**The Catholic identity of schools must become an intentional aspect of the planning, orientation, training, and evaluation of the faculty and administration of Catholic schools.** Dallavis (2014) stated, “teacher caring is considered central to the educational mission of the Catholic school, as is the enactment and transmission of a caring disposition, and this disposition is expressed using religious language” (p. 170). Where the demographics of Catholic school populations vary among the regions of the country, what is perceived but not readily measured is Catholic identity. Schools where this measure is an intentional aspect of their internal evaluation process report a more unified sense of faculty-student relationships.

**Faculty-Student relationships should be measured regarding their effectiveness in bolstering academic achievement and Catholic mission.**

Few tools exist to assist in this area. As previously defined, school climate refers to the quality and character of school life, including values, relationships, and organizational structures, and is closely correlated with educational effectiveness (National School Climate Center, 2014). To change school culture, a baseline measure is necessary, like what was attempted in this study.

Defining and measuring culture and climate is an important but challenging endeavor for Catholic schools. The balance needed to maximize the faculty-student relationship as constitutive of an effective mission may be thought to be academic trust, counseling awareness, proper boundaries, the ability to speak in religious terms that are meaningful to students, and the ability to relate the world beyond the school to the student experience within the school.

If the characteristics of Communion and Community (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2013), are intricately tied to both schools' missions and the ecclesiology of the Catholic Church, then, a more comprehensive examination of the orientation, development, and goal setting process of both faculty and students in Catholic schools is vital to the future of the enterprise. From a historical perspective, church organizations have taken credit for positive relationships between faculty, clergy, and the religious, and they have been taken to task about negative relationships. How intentional we become as a church community about the quality of such relationships is a project to be engaged via ongoing assessment.

Pianta, Hamre, and Allen (2012) suggest using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) that is derived from the Teaching Through Interactions framework. CLASS is an "empirically supported system for conceptualizing, organizing, and measuring classroom interactions between teachers and students into three major domains—emotional supports, classroom organization, and instructional supports" (p. 372). With both feedback and support, teachers can change the nature of their interactions with students to strengthen teachers' efforts to support students' emotional and social functioning, manage student behavior and promote positive behavior, and foster intellectual development through relevant and challenging instruction.

**Cultural awareness and culturally responsive pedagogy must become components of Catholic school orientation and teacher education.** Catholic schools are welcoming students from multiple cultural backgrounds within the same school building. Whereas previous generations of Catholic educators could create an individual culture within the school that related to a relatively homogeneous student culture, the differences in student cultures no longer interface as easily with the existing school cultures. Racial and ethnic differences, as well as socioeconomic differences are significant when they are ignored. Culturally responsive pedagogy is, in part, based on the premise that "the relational practices of teaching—those aspects of teaching that hinge on teachers' capacity to relate to students—depend in part on teachers'



knowledge and understanding of the communities and families of the particular students with whom they work” (McDonald, Bowman & Brayko, 2013, p. 31). Teachers may consider creating time to learn about their students via classroom activities, but also by spending time with them outside the classroom. By doing so, teachers will begin to see students’ interests, understand their perspectives and gain knowledge of the students’ home lives. The most important tool in building relationships with students who live in other communities or neighborhoods is to become knowledgeable about and engaged in their community. This facilitates becoming aware of their religious beliefs and backgrounds and having conversations with parents. It is also essential that both pre-service teacher education and ongoing professional development include ongoing opportunities that facilitate teachers’ understanding of themselves as cultural beings, allowing them to acknowledge and confront any bias toward or against any aspect of culture. Pre-service teachers would benefit from learning about cultural aspects of their students and how these are related to learning and social-emotional development and how to implement culturally responsive instruction in the classroom.

Culturally responsive pedagogy acknowledges that students’ cultural existence must become a part of schools’ Catholic culture. This interplay is a dynamic series of continuing conversations and does not favor student culture over Catholic culture, nor does it give primacy to an adult culture that does not adequately “speak” to student culture. One aspect of culture that is not always explicitly addressed is the religion and spirituality of the students. Dallavis (2008) stated, “teachers who take responsibility for learning about student religious identity, belief, and practice might enhance their capacity to be culturally responsive” (p. 276). This is not to be interpreted as a reason to not be explicitly Catholic in all aspects of relationships and classroom instruction. Instead, being able to connect with students and relate to them based on shared values and knowledge can strengthen the relationship between teachers and students. Often the main difference in the religious and spiritual cultures of the students and the school are not values and beliefs, but religious practices, and therefore, students and teachers share a “common mission and vision” (Irvine, 2003, p. 8). Dallavis (2008) suggested:

One important first step those involved in Catholic school leadership preparation might take would be to encourage principals and pastors to produce a statement articulating the values that a Catholic school seeks to instill in its students and then articulate a religion curriculum that ensures that those values are fully considered in the classroom (p. 281.)

**The impact of teacher expectations on the student-teacher relationship should be acknowledged.** Students become motivated and engaged when offered challenges that are attainable, provide an opportunity for autonomy and feelings of self-efficacy, and are adequately supported (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Caring for students is the most important characteristic of culturally responsive teachers, and caring takes “the form of teacher attitudes, expectations, and behaviors about students’ human value, intellectual capability, and performance responsibilities” (Gay, 2000, p. 45). Dallavis (2014) found dominant themes among Catholic School teachers, parents, and students that “reflected high expectations and culturally responsive caring about students and student achievement” (p. 18). This is encapsulated in the statement of this parent,

I find the teachers to be very encouraging around academics and are accessible and supportive of my daughter, even beyond academic needs.

### Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is that students’ responses cannot be analyzed to show the responses for students of specific demographic descriptors. Therefore, we were unable to see if there were differences in perception based on race or those who receive state assistance. Future research may collect data in such a way that the strength of teacher-student relationships can be examined to show gaps in these types of relationships and teachers’ perceptions of students. A second limitation was using aggregated data when there were notable differences between schools. There were differing degrees of state assistance accepted at these schools so that conclusions around the impact of state assistance on teacher/student relationships and faith formation cannot be made. The decision to use aggregated data was made to protect the identity of the schools that were single cases of homogenous student populations.

### Conclusion

Teachers and students in this study reported different perceptions about the quality and strength of the relationship with each another. Given students’ responses, teachers over-estimated how well they knew their students academically, personally, and on factors related to faith development. Relationships matter. Regardless of how well school leaders and teachers believe



they are teaching and connecting with students, students' beliefs about the school inform decision-makers of both the strengths of the school and areas in need of improvement. Catholic schools are positioned to be leaders in developing positive teacher-student relationships. Catholic instructional practices and faith formation are inherent advantages in Catholic schools as they reinforce and support the development of the strong teacher-student relationships that are associated with high student achievement. They do this through believing that each student is created in the likeness of God and by intentionally getting to know students as individuals at a particularly formative juncture in their lives. Therefore, Catholic schools can and should have added value and effect. Catholic schools, more than ever, can be the option every parent has, regardless of race, ethnicity, or even religious affiliation, as intentionally and authentically developing the whole child.

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