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## **A Phenomenology of the Job-Related Experiences of Early Career Catholic Elementary School Principals**

Sarah K. Kerins<sup>1</sup> and Lucinda S. Spaulding<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** This qualitative phenomenology investigated the job-related experiences of early career Catholic elementary school principals ( $N = 13$ ) in the Mideastern region of the United States. Data were collected from an introductory survey, semi-structured interviews, two focus groups, and a participant designed plan for professional development. The findings indicated that Catholic elementary principals in their early career are motivated by a calling to a vocation in Catholic school leadership as well as the ability to develop and implement a vision for their school. Principals reported being challenged by limited resources, balancing the demands of the position, and navigating relationships. Finally, principals believed they are supported by diocesan administrators in the areas of human resources and student issues, particularly if the concerns have legal implications.

**Keywords:** leadership, school administration, principalship, Catholic education, principal attrition, principal retention

Catholic schools have provided a place for children and their families to encounter the risen Christ for centuries. For Catholic schools to continue carrying out this mission and ensuring the future of the U.S. Catholic school system, effective school leadership is essential. Unfortunately, private schools as a whole struggle with administration retention (Goldring & Taie, 2014). According to the U.S. Department of Education, 11% of private school principals left the profession during the 2012-2013 school year (Goldring & Taie, 2014). Of the 11% of principals who relinquished their positions, those with three to five years of experience had the highest

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attrition rate (15.3%). This qualitative phenomenological study was designed to examine the job-related experiences of early career Catholic elementary school principals, identifying their various motivations, challenges, and support needs, and thereby identifying ways to increase retention of these instrumental leaders.

### **History of the American Parochial School System**

A defining feature of qualitative inquiry is the examination of a phenomenon within its natural context (García-Garduño et al., 2011). To understand the context of early career Catholic elementary school principal vocational experiences, it is important to examine the historical context of Catholic schools in the United States as well as the empirical and theoretical literature informing the scope and focus of the current research.

The first parochial school in the United States was founded in 1783 by Saint Mary Parish in Philadelphia, and it still exists today under the name Saint Mary Interparochial School. Nearly 50 years after its founding, the influx of Irish and German Catholic immigrants led to social unrest in cities such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Protestant ministers warned of Catholic conspiracies that would undermine the young nation (Walch, 2003). Anti-immigration sentiment led to riots, such as the nativist inspired Philadelphia Bible Riots. Catholic homes and two churches in Philadelphia were burned to the ground, resulting in the deaths of 13 people (Brinig & Garnett, 2014).

As parishes and dioceses grew larger, there was a greater need for Catholic schools to protect the religious faith and traditions of Catholic children. Bishop John Neumann (now Saint John Neumann) established the first parochial school system in Philadelphia in 1852 (Walch, 2003). In 1884, the bishops of the United States held the Third Plenary Council in Baltimore. The council “ordered all parish priests to establish parochial schools within two years and provided that they would be removed from their posts for failure to do so” (Brinig & Garnett, 2014 , p.15). The bishops required faithful support and effort in every parish to build and establish a school. The council emphasized the importance of Christian education by instructing all Catholic parents to send their children to parochial schools leaving few exceptions (Brinig & Garnett, 2014).

The mission of Catholic schools in the United States is just as important in the 21st century as it was in the 19th century. Catholic schools are a place where children and their families encounter the risen Christ. The mission of Catholic school is first and foremost to evangelize (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977). Catholic schools are sustained by the Gospel witness, shaped by community, and committed to educating the whole child (Dosen, 016a). Well trained, effective leadership is necessary to carry out the mission and ensure the future of the Catholic school system in America, which has molded and shaped countless minds and hearts over the centuries.

## **Catholic School Leadership**

The role of the Catholic elementary school principal is multifaceted and continues to increase in complexity (Kafka, 2009). Extending beyond academic leadership, principals in the Catholic school system perform most job functions of their public school counterparts, in addition to acquiring financial resources for scholarships, maintaining and increasing enrollment, and fostering the Catholic identity of the school (Boyle et al., 2016; Rieckhoff, 2014). According to Ozar and Weitzel-O'Neill (2012), "Catholic school governance and leadership can be seen as a ministry that promotes and protects the responsibilities and rights of the school community" (p. 7). Defiore et al. (2009) reported that the demands of the job exceed the capacity of one person, and that principals often find themselves doing everything from "social work to plumbing" (loc. 531).

Catholic school principals are required to shape the school's catholicity by implementing the religious education curriculum and ensuring the faculty is adequately prepared and qualified to teach it (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012). Catholic schools face a lack of teacher candidates, both because of the required commitment to the Catholic faith and the competition of higher paying public schools (Schuttloffel, 2007). Even when committed to the mission of Catholic education, these professional educators may be turned off by the lower salary, which often does not compensate for the demands of the position (Schuttloffel, 2007).

The Catholic Church has a long-standing tradition of academic excellence dating back to Saint Augustine, who was known for bridging the cultural and intellectual gap between classical and Christian civilizations (Guttek, 2011). The Catholic intellectual tradition is built upon the intellectual legacies of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas, who emphasized the relationship between faith and reason (Dosen, 016b). The principal, who oversees the academic program, must ensure that it is rooted in the Gospel. Academically excellent Catholic schools have doctrinally sound religious education as well as a rigorous, relevant, and research-based curriculum, which brings faith, culture, and life harmoniously together to shape the whole person (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012).

Excellent leadership and academic programs which adhere to the mission of Catholic schools all contribute to operational vitality (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012). Operational vitality refers to the operation of the school and how the school is financially supported. Financial viability has been identified as a primary reason for Catholic school closures (Defiore et al., 2009). In most Catholic elementary schools, the principal is responsible for effective institutional advancement, which includes a comprehensive plan for marketing, enrollment management, and development (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012). Part of the institutional advancement plan should be comprised of partnerships with businesses and philanthropic foundations that support Catholic education (Montejano, 2016). School boards, if they are part of the governance structure, often hold

authority over school finances (Sheehan, 1996). The principal, often in concert with the pastor, is responsible for leading the Catholic school advancement efforts.

### **The Novice Principal**

The expanding role of the Catholic elementary school principal comes with an increase in challenges which are difficult to navigate, especially for novice principals (Crow & Whiteman, 2016). In a survey of Catholic diocesan superintendents, respondents reported that Catholic leadership programs were most effective in preparing their novice principals, but the majority of “Catholic school principals graduated from secular institutions and may or may not have completed a diocesan leadership program” (p. 12). Therefore, the majority of respondents were not fully prepared for the unique challenges of Catholic schools. Unfortunately, 37% of Catholic superintendents reported that their novice principals were most critically lacking in spiritual leadership, and 19% reported that novice principals most critically lacked theological knowledge (Schuttloffel, 2003).

Novice principals face challenges that go far beyond their managerial role. Spillane and Lee (2014) found that in the first three months of service, principals are overwhelmed by the sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of every employee or student in their care. Novice principals find it difficult to manage task volume, diversity, and unpredictability, and they report feeling that their time is divided in too many directions (Spillane & Lee, 2014). Novice leaders are surprised by the workload, the frequency and intensity of their work-related stress, and the struggle to maintain a work-life balance (Beam et al., 2016; Gentilucci et al., 2013; Karakose et al., 2014).

Shoho and Barnett (2010) discovered that new principals spent more time than expected on parental concerns and school-related politics. Solving difficult personnel issues is also a significant challenge (Shoho & Barnett, 2010). Cray and Weiler (2011) interviewed superintendents ( $N = 77$ ) who reported that novice principals are challenged by human relations, particularly when it relates to supervision of personnel and instructional leadership. Furthermore, 20% of novice principals believed support from superiors was lacking, and that asking for help from superiors was a sign of weakness (Beam et al., 2016). Novice principals often lack political awareness and knowledge of responding to difficult stakeholders, as well as the ability to effectively manage conflict resolution. Situational awareness is difficult to teach, which is why leadership preparation programs often fail to adequately prepare students in those areas (Cray & Weiler, 2011). Perhaps the most surprising theme is the difficulty novice principals have in overcoming the reputation of the previous principal (Karakose et al., 2014) and in establishing credibility (Beam et al., 2016).

### **Principal Job Satisfaction**

Most of the research related to retention, attrition, and job satisfaction of school principals is conducted in the public education setting; however, because many of the job responsibilities are

similar, the research is transferable to Catholic schools. Factors contributing to job dissatisfaction center on support, responsibility and accountability, compensation, and stress. Principals reported that a lack of respect from colleagues made their positions more challenging (Beam et al., 2016; Hancock & Müller, 2014; Karakose et al., 2014). Additionally, an absence of support from superiors contributes to stress or other difficulties (Beam et al., 2016; De Jong et al., 2017; García-Garduño et al., 2011; Gentilucci et al., 2013). Chang et al. (2015) discovered a superintendent's support of principal autonomy is a significant factor in organizational commitment and job satisfaction. When principals feel a sense of autonomy and personal accomplishment, their job satisfaction increases (Chang et al., 2015; Karakose et al., 2016).

Seventy-five percent of principals from schools across varying demographics believe the role has become too complex (Markow et al., 2012). They believe principals have extensive responsibilities (Grubb & Flessa, 2006), limited control, and relentless accountability (West et al., 2010). Research reveals that time spent on instructional leadership activities improves student achievement (Grissom et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2015). This makes the overload of managerial tasks problematic, as principals reported spending 41% of the workday in their offices and only 10% of the workday in classrooms (Grissom et al., 2015).

Answering email communication, responding to phone messages, and completing paperwork (Barnett et al., 2012; Hancock & Müller, 2014; Klocko & Wells, 2015) and forms which potentially go unread by central office (Oplatka, 2017) consumes most of the principal's day. Student-related issues (Camburn et al., 2010; Horng et al., 2010) and special education compliance (Van Vooren, 2018) were also reported as time-consuming activities in the principal's daily schedule. Other activities which keep principals from the classroom are unexpected requests from stakeholders (Oplatka, 2017) and frequent and constant interruptions (Klocko & Wells, 2015; Poirel & Yvon, 2014). Visits from central office administrators (Oplatka, 2017) and increased performance expectations (Klocko & Wells, 2015) also contribute to the challenges of the position.

Principals feel an enormous amount of responsibility, which can lead to high levels of stress with both physical and emotional symptoms. Forty-eight percent of principals reported experiencing significant stress several times per week (Markow et al., 2012) with difficulties managing time being one of the greatest contributors to work-related stress (Grissom et al., 2015). Principals have a particularly difficult time managing a work-life balance (Barnett et al., 2012; Beam et al., 2016; Oplatka, 2017). They are often overwhelmed with the demands of the position and, as a result, experience a loss of joy in their work (Klocko & Wells, 2015).

In addition to the challenging work-life balance, a salary incommensurate with job demands with job demands is seen as another barrier to becoming a principal (Hancock & Müller, 2014; Karakose et al., 2014). Salary research showed that school principals perceive their salaries as disproportionate to their responsibilities which contributes to job-dissatisfaction (Hancock &

Müller, 2014; Karakose et al., 2014) . On average, public school districts spend about \$14,000 per principal per year for on-the-job support and evaluation (Kaufman et al., 2017) , making principal attrition costly.

### **Catholic School Principal Attrition**

Durow and Brock (2004) investigated factors leading to retention or attrition among Catholic school principals. Interestingly, not a single participant interviewed left their position due to retirement. In conflicting studies, Catholic superintendents reported only 2% attrition among their principals in 2003. Durow & Brock (2004) reported that 31.25% of principals in one Midwestern diocese left the principalship or moved to a principalship in a different school within a three-year period. Similarly, Bigelow (2017) reported that 42 principals left their position from only 24 elementary and high schools over a 10-year period in one southern diocese. With no recent national data on Catholic school principal attrition, it is hard to determine why Durow & Brock (2004) and Bigelow (2017) data contrasts Schuttloffel's study from 2003, as well as the data from all private schools in the United States, which reported 15% attrition from private schools (Goldring & Taie, 2014).

Attrition can be the result of conflicts in school governance, changes in the school's vision, and aspects of the school's political climate. The pastor is sometimes the center of conflict, particularly if he holds an autocratic leadership style (Durow & Brock, 2004). In a similar study on principal attrition, Bigelow (2017) reported that the unraveling of the pastor-principal relationship significantly impacted principals' decisions to leave their positions. While Durow & Brock (2004) described changing personal needs and a lack of advancement opportunities as factors leading to attrition, Bigelow (2017) found the lack of support from the diocesan Catholic schools office as another factor of attrition. Defiore et al. (2009) reported that diocesan leadership and "passionate commitment from the bishop" (loc. 565) is critically important. Additionally, principals were found to be dissatisfied with their positions largely because of the growing, complex demands and the minimal salary (Fraser & Brock, 2006). Principals believed they were not recognized or appreciated nearly enough for their contributions to the school.

While Bigelow (2017) discussed the role of central office in principal attrition, there is no research on the direct role of the (arch)bishop in principal attrition. A recent study of the turnover and retention of Catholic school superintendents revealed that superintendents had negative experiences in chanceries, which they described as difficult and frustrating. Such negative interactions caused eight of the 10 former superintendents who participated in the study to leave their positions. Former superintendents revealed that they needed strong support and a closer working relationship with the (arch)bishop, especially when facing difficult decisions (Cook et al., 2021) . While this research did not directly address the relationship between the (arch)diocesan

bishop and principals, the superintendent's relationship with the (arch)bishop will have an impact on school principals, especially when it comes to policy decisions.

Leadership in Catholic schools include several exclusive dimensions which are relevant only to Catholic education, not to their public education counterparts. These include enrollment management, scholarship funding, and school-parish relations. The multi-directional governance of the Catholic school system can create roadblocks to progress. The additional pressure of building enrollment and related financial concerns creates an additional layer of stress for the Catholic school principal. With the attrition rate of principals being the highest in the three to five-year window, it was necessary to investigate the experiences of principals early in their career.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework in a qualitative study helps define the scope of the study while also serving as a lens to analyze and make sense of the qualitative phenomenon examined (Creswell, 2013). Alderfer's (1969) existence, relatedness, and growth theory, derived from Maslow's (1943) theory of human motivation, provided the most suitable organizational framework for analyzing and reporting job-related experiences in the vocation-driven career of a Catholic school principal. Building on Maslow's (1943) work, Alderfer (1969) reframed the five needs categories into three: existence, relatedness, and growth. Alderfer (1969) departed from Maslow (1943) by placing the needs on a continuum from more concrete existence needs to less concrete growth goals, rather than an ordered hierarchy. Alderfer (1969) introduced the concept of frustration regression—when a person cannot attain fewer concrete goals, he or she regresses and is motivated to seek comfort from more concrete needs (Alderfer, 1969). Alderfer's (1969) existence, relatedness, and growth theory provided a helpful lens to examine and describe the vocational experiences of early career Catholic elementary school principals.

### **Method**

A transcendental phenomenological design (Moustakas, 1994) was selected to study early career Catholic elementary school principals in their natural environment where they shared the complexity of their profession. To reduce bias, the primary researcher (first author) engaged in reflexive journaling to consciously suspend preconceived notions and judgements based on personal experience with the study phenomenon.

### **Setting and Participants**

A purposeful sample of 13 principals was selected from six dioceses within four states located in the Mideastern United States (see Table 1). The Mideastern region is defined by the National Catholic Education Association as states including Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and the District of Columbia (Schultz & McDonald, 2013).



The primary researcher contacted several diocesan offices within the Mideastern region to request permission to conduct the study and gather the names and contact information of potential participants. An introductory survey requested participants share demographic and professional information to ensure each participant was employed at a Catholic elementary school affiliated with a diocese in the Mideastern region of the United States, and that their respective diocesan offices of education held some jurisdiction over the school. Participants were delimited to current second through fifth year head principals at their school. Table 1 provides an overview of the final sample.

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

Participant	Age	Generation	Gender	Race	Ethnicity	No. of Yrs. as Principal
Elizabeth	50-60	Generation X	Female	White	Non-Hispanic	4
Anne	30-40	Millennial	Female	White	Non-Hispanic	4
Bridget	60-70	Baby Boomer	Female	White	Non-Hispanic	2
Felicity	40-50	Generation X	Female	White	Hispanic	2
Monica	30-40	Millennial	Female	White	Hispanic	4
Philomena	30-40	Millennial	Female	White	Non-Hispanic	3
Cecilia	40-50	Generation X	Female	White	Non-Hispanic	2
Deborah	60-70	Baby Boomer	Female	White	Non-Hispanic	2
Katharine	30-40	Generation X	Female	White	Non-Hispanic	3
Laurence	30-40	Millennial	Male	White	Non-Hispanic	2
Isabel	60-70	Baby Boomer	Female	White	Non-Hispanic	2
Helena	50-60	Generation X	Female	White	Non-Hispanic	4
Jane	40-50	Generation X	Female	White	Non-Hispanic	2

Note. The generations are defined as follows: Baby Boomer (born 1946 -1964), Generation X (born 1965-1980), and Millennial (born 1981-1996).

**Data Collection**

For the purpose of triangulation, data were collected from three sources: semi-structured interviews, participant generated professional development plans, and focus group interviews. Data saturation occurred around the addition of the ninth participant when no new themes or salient findings emerged, but analysis of this data from additional participants served to confirm established findings. All interviews were recorded by two devices, professionally transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy. Each participant verified the transcript, and the second author conducted an audit of all steps and procedures.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis procedures for Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological design were used. Using the Moustakas' (1994) modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis,

significant statements from each interview/focus group transcript and professional development plan were sorted into concept nodes, a process Moustakas (1994) described as horizontalization. Initially, there were 677 significant statements. Using Saldaña's (2016) two cycle coding process, concept codes were further reduced into pattern codes. The pattern codes were organized into themes and developed a noematic (textural) description of *what* each participant experienced. The imaginative variation process helped to develop a noetic (structural) description of *how* the participants experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Individual textural and structural descriptions were integrated into a composite textural and structural description. The composite textural and structural descriptions were synthesized into themes that portray the *essence* of the experience (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Participants were provided with a description of these main themes, the process of member checking, to confirm that the description of the phenomenon authentically represented their lived experience as a Catholic elementary school principal, as well as to clarify any conflicting information.

## **Findings**

Analysis and triangulation of the data from semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and a participant designed plan for professional development revealed findings centered around three overarching themes: (a) motivation to persist in the position, (b) job-related challenges, and (c) support. The themes revealed the essence of the early career Catholic elementary school principal experience, that these leaders are prophets of a future not their own.

### **Motivation to Persist in the Position**

Many participants reported experiencing a call to vocation in Catholic school leadership, which served as a strong motivator to persist in the position. For some the call was overt, and for others it was a gentle nudge in the right direction. Eight of the 13 principals specifically mentioned feeling called by God to serve the Church as a Catholic educator. When speaking about her discernment process, Cecilia shared,

But there was this...it actually would wake me up in the middle of the night when I was trying to decide whether to apply, this like, gnawing, "You need to do this. You can make a change. You need to do this. This is what you need to do..." So it was really, as strange as it sounds, it was really a calling that this is where I needed to be.

While over half of the participants described feeling a calling to the career, the others described a feeling of comfort or allegiance to the Catholic school system. Some participants had deep legacies in the system, having attended Catholic schools themselves. While it cannot be said with certainty that the other participants did not feel a specific prompting by the Holy Spirit, the sense of comfort brought by the intersection of faith and academics was woven throughout their responses.

Early career Catholic elementary principals had a defined leadership ethos with four distinctive leadership qualities: personable, collaborative, resourceful, and invested. Six of the participants described themselves as personable and viewed relationship building as a necessary skill for success in a position which requires some political finesse. The principals spoke specifically of collaborating with faculty, as well as the importance of building comradery and a shared vision. One participant, Isabelle, explained she needed to build relationships with the faculty to avoid feelings of isolation.

Perhaps one of the most important qualities the participants exemplified was their ability to leverage their resources creatively. Felicity, whose school is in a fairly urban setting, was emphatic about spending all available federal Title Funds and using them strategically. She recounted,

I've literally spent every penny that they've had. We have returned 13 cents, and I'm still bitter over it because somebody could've had a cup of coffee somewhere. I think my strength is in knowing what our resources are and building relationships with the people who handle our funding.

Based on the information provided by the participants, each diocese represented did not dictate specific instructional programs; therefore, principals had the freedom to choose their instructional materials within certain parameters. This was corroborated by the focus group interviews during the discussion on curriculum. Isabel shared with the group, "There is an awful lot of time and efficiency lost when we all are hunting down [textbooks] because our science books are from when Laurence was an altar boy [reference to a younger participant in the focus group]."

One of the greatest motivators was vision. Accomplishing a vision demands more than just creativity and drive; it also requires commitment to the mission. It was clear most participants were invested in their schools and Catholic education in general. Four principals specifically mentioned their investment in and passion for Catholic education. Principals described being compelled to accept such a large and challenging position of leadership because they were passionate about making a difference in the lives of their students and believed they could make a positive change. Laurence talked about different curricular initiatives he was implementing and saw his school as an innovative leader in his diocese. Laurence, too, was inspired by progress. He responded,

What motivates me to continue? I think the biggest thing is it's seeing what your efforts are. You're not just guiding a classroom of 20 kids; you're guiding the entire school. So you get to see the progression of changing something in kindergarten, and one or two. Then all of a sudden, you're trickling that up through, and you get to see that progress made.

While principals discussed making changes to implement their vision, they also mentioned that it was challenging to get everyone on board.

## Job-Related Challenges

While principals reported experiencing the joy of working with children and their families, as well as mentoring faculty, they faced significant challenges as well. Although the Catholic school is mission driven, it must also be operated as a business. Catholic schools in the United States are not taxpayer funded, and so their competition is the free public schools, free charter schools, and other private schools. Principals expressed it was a challenge to keep up with innovative curriculum when there was a lack of funding to accomplish innovative changes. Financial challenges included finding quality teachers willing to accept a lower salary. Cecilia summed up the financial struggle of the schools when discussing the challenges of the principalship.

But that's my biggest challenge, is trying to get good teachers and pay them pennies and trying to get parents in here and giving them the quality education with the lack of funds, trying to be creative with those funds and trying to find the money.

Principals also discussed declining enrollment as a factor in financial sustainability. Marketing and fundraising topics were mentioned by eight participants in their professional development plans.

Principals feel pulled in too many directions with an overwhelming number of responsibilities (Grissom et al., 2013; Grubb & Flessa, 2006; Mitchell et al., 2015), and they feel challenged by the endless number of managerial tasks. The node *demands* had 51 significant statements within the one-to-one interviews alone. Isabel explained, "I think what surprised me was the amount of administrative paperwork. I knew there'd be a lot, but boy there sure is." Anne expanded by describing the need to understand and perform numerous job functions.

You kind of have to be a Jack of all trades because I think some people are fortunate enough to have a Marketing Director or an Enrollment Manager. I think mostly a bunch of us are running around like maniacs trying to get pictures of what's going on in our building, throwing it up on social media while still tending to the instruction that's going on in the classroom. I often feel like if I do one thing really well that means that I'd drop something else that's very important. That's a huge challenge.

Principals also discussed the challenges of delegating, the lack of administrative support staff, and the constant interruptions, which all contributed to feeling overwhelmed. Helena had a humorous way of articulating the realities of the job, which put the principalship into perspective. When asked about her legacy, she responded,

Toilets. I upgraded all the toilets when I got here. That was my biggest legacy. Because I walked in here, I was like, "What're we doing here? These are the worst toilets I ever saw." So, I upgraded all the bathrooms.

Whether it is upgrading facilities, chasing a bird out of a classroom as Elizabeth described, or fixing leaky toilets (mentioned by three participants), the principal is often alone in these endeavors.

Relationships with personnel and parents, while they can be positive and inspiring, are sometimes taxing in surprising ways. Nine principals reported challenges related to the missteps or reputation of the previous principal. Nine of the 13 participants described challenges with supervising personnel, particularly in two areas: implementing curricular changes and faculty demands. While most participants described their faculty as dedicated and professional individuals, some were surprised by unprofessional behavior they encountered from faculty and other employees. Anne shared a story about her very first day of school her first year as principal.

I did not expect it to be so difficult to pull a faculty together. For many of them I was their sixth principal in 13 years. I had a teacher stand outside of the main office on the first day of school with her hands on her hips and say, “You know, we’ve had more principals here than we know what to do with. We run this school; we don’t need a Principal anymore.”

Some principals reported that parents could be demanding, particularly because they pay tuition. Cecilia shared, “So sometimes there is a little bit of an entitlement. ‘If I pay money here, I can tell you what to do.’” Six principals mentioned enrollment as being a significant concern. Answering the demands of parents takes on a whole different dimension when a principal must consider enrollment in the decision-making process.

## **Support**

Despite most participants acknowledging central office administrators were spread just as thin as the principals, seven out of the 13 participants specifically reported that central office administrators immediately return their phone calls. The seven principals who reported helpful support from the diocese found their central office administrators to be genuinely interested and invested in providing support. Participants identified two areas in which they found central office administrators to be particularly strong supporters: human resources and student issues, especially when the concerns had legal implications. While seven principals explicitly mentioned diocesan gaps in support, none of the principals said their central office administrators were *unsupportive*.

There were six areas consistent across all six dioceses in which principals identified needing more support: teacher supervision, curriculum decisions, leveraging resources, professional development, communication, and diocesan presence. Ten out of the 13 participants desired more professional development in teacher supervision. Nine participants either discussed teacher observations in the personal interview or listed it in their professional development plan. Several principals indicated that the diocesan expectations of teacher performance were unclear; specifically, principals wanted to be able to identify observed teaching practices and match them to

the language of supervision rubrics. A few principals either specifically stated or alluded to wanting more information about how to give meaningful feedback.

Human resources decisions were discussed by five out of the 13 participants. Three principals were interested in learning more about hiring and firing procedures. Two principals listed *teacher retention* in their professional development plans, and a few mentioned the low teacher salary as an obstacle to teacher retention in their personal interview. As previously discussed, a few principals were surprised by the behavior of some of their faculty. It takes a different kind of energy and finesse to manage adults. Monica made an interesting point when she said, “I think a big topic that I don’t think is handled well is supervising adults and teaching adults. Because all of us have skillsets of supervising and teaching children.” A principal’s focus is primarily the children; however, proficiency in adult education is essential when supervising and mentoring teachers.

Curriculum leadership was a hot button issue in both focus groups and individual interviews. Nine out of 13 participants spoke specifically about the way curricular decisions are made at the diocesan level. While principals enjoyed their freedom to choose programs, they pointed out that time is wasted reviewing programs when it could instead be done thoroughly on a diocesan level, given that it’s a collaborative process. During the focus group, Katharine spoke passionately about the topic: “I feel strongly, at least in our diocese, that we could strengthen what we do if there was more, really, coordination of programming between our schools.” The challenges with curriculum are related to the previously shared findings in the theme *resources*. Financial resources dictate curriculum decisions from school to school, and while participants did not discuss it overtly, the millennial and younger Generation X principals alluded to frustration with a lack of innovation in curriculum at the diocesan level.

The desire to know how to best leverage resources derived from three areas: purchasing power, government funding, and budget planning. Participants overall believed schools could collaborate as a system and better pool their resources. If schools had a more unified approach to curriculum development, principals could also pool resources for professional development to assist with program implementation. Six out of the 13 principals reported that they needed more guidance for using government funds effectively. The topic also appeared in five professional development plans. Budget planning was discussed in the personal interviews by five participants. Six participants listed budget planning on their professional development plans.

Eight out of 13 participants addressed professional development for faculty and administrators, indicating a significant area of need. In Anne’s professional development plan, she wrote, “Planning Professional Development: How to assess the needs of your faculty and acceptable resources for planning PD.” Two key topics were identified around communication: relationships with stakeholders and networking with colleagues. Six out of 13 principals specifically mentioned communication with parents and engaging the community, either in their personal interview or

their professional development plan. A few principals mentioned donor relationships, parish relationships, and facilitating conflict resolution with staff.

Participants articulated frustration with diocesan officials' lack of presence. The concept of diocesan presence manifested in three areas: understaffed central offices, central office administrators' lack of physical presence within the schools, and the inaccessibility of the bishop. Cecilia lamented, "My biggest complaint is there's not enough of them. It's like you have three [diocesan administrators] running 100 schools." Elizabeth shared a similar sentiment when she said, "And I think the diocese is swamped in terms of what they can provide for all of us." With so many schools in their charge, diocesan administrators have little time to be physically present in the schools.

### **Discussion**

Participants experienced the Catholic elementary principalship during the Catholic Church's decline in active membership (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2019). Since recent research demonstrates that religious formation is not a top consideration for parents considering a Catholic education (Simon & Robbins, 2018), Catholic elementary principals also face the challenge of balancing their attention between implementing competitive, innovative instructional methods while maintaining the school's Catholic identity. Consequently, Catholic elementary principals are leading the Church during an extraordinarily evangelistic opportunity in American Catholic history.

#### **Existence, Relatedness, and Growth**

The results of this study fit within the existence, relatedness, and growth theory (ERG) (Alderfer, 1969). Principals are largely not motivated by their existence needs. Rather, they are motivated by their calling from God, relationships with colleagues, and support from superiors. Principals in their early career are also driven by fulfilling growth needs such as setting a vision, professional development, and successful school advancement. School leaders should be provided networking opportunities, support from superiors, and opportunities to grow and implement their vision.

Frustration for early career Catholic elementary principals is caused by the lack of resources to implement their vision. Consistent with the frustration regression of the ERG theory (Alderfer, 1969), it is possible that, when principals feel frustrated, their desire for collegial support will increase. If collegial support is not present, principals may turn to monetary considerations to make a decision about their positions. If principals are not fulfilled spiritually and professionally, the internal cost-benefit analysis may lead to attrition.

#### **Motivation to Lead**

Catholic elementary principals in their early careers are initially motivated by their *calling* to a vocation in Catholic leadership. The theme calling was consistent with the previous finding

that 60% of Catholic teachers are motivated to minister to their students (Convey, 2014). It's also consistent with Fraser and Brock's (2006) findings, which identified commitment to Catholic education and the Church as factors of principal retention. Participants wanted to make a difference in their school communities by implementing a vision for a sustainable future. Leithwood et al. (2004) discussed setting direction as an important dimension of successful school leadership. Kouzes and Posner (2012) found that successful leaders challenge the process by searching for opportunities and innovative ways to improve. Catholic elementary principals, especially the younger Generation X ( $n = 2$ ) and millennials ( $n = 4$ ), are motivated by opportunities for curriculum innovation, further demonstrating that autonomy and personal accomplishment increase job satisfaction (Chang et al., 2015; Karakose et al., 2016).

### **Challenges**

While the issues of inadequate facilities (Darmody & Smyth, 2016) and financial concerns (Beam et al., 2016; García-Garduño et al., 2011) were mentioned in previous literature as challenges for principals, both issues were further magnified in this study. Challenges and needs largely centered on funding limitations. Participants were especially frustrated that their central office administrators did not provide more guidance concerning how to effectively use Title funds.

Balance in the workplace and home was discussed at length in previous studies on school leadership. Previous literature revealed that principals often find themselves engaged in task-oriented work instead of focusing on instructional leadership (Barnett et al., 2012; Grissom et al., 2013; Hancock & Müller, 2014; Klocko & Wells, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2015). The high volume of managerial tasks surprised Catholic elementary principals. While participants in this study discussed the long hours, task volume, high demands, and challenges of balancing work and family life, high stress levels were not discussed, diverging from prior research (Gentilucci et al., 2013).

Solving difficult personnel issues (Shoho & Barnett, 2010) and challenges motivating teachers were reported in previous studies (Barnett et al., 2012; Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Karakose et al., 2014). Many participants in this study described the challenges of moving faculty in a single direction, as well as difficulties with faculty who resist change. Three principals discussed terminating faculty, which required support from the central office. Some participants shared they were surprised by some of the behaviors of their staff but believed themselves equipped to handle them. Catholic elementary principals described success with faculty progression toward their vision and goals which is consistent with the research on transformational leadership (Mehdinezhad & Mansouri, 2016).

### **Support**

The research on principal preparation programs is sparse. Apart from one, each participant underwent some form of leadership training, whether it was a master's program, certificate



program, or diocesan leadership pipeline program. Up until the Levine report was published in 2005, principal preparation programs were found to have large deficits. The participants in this study believed their leadership programs, as well as their teaching experience, prepared them well for instructional leadership and student issues. Principals believed themselves unprepared for both the day-to-day time management and the many Catholic-school specific tasks, such as budgeting. The findings in this study are consistent with Schuttloffel's (2003) findings where 32% of Catholic superintendents reported that novice principals were most critically lacking in administrative skills, compared to only 8% of superintendents who reported novice principals were most critically lacking in instructional leadership. Participants also believed that a more situational learning process would have proven more beneficial than overall leadership philosophy, a theme consistent with Cray & Weiler's (2011) research which found that situational awareness is difficult to teach.

Previous researchers found that effective mentoring programs provide opportunities for principals to overcome a sense of isolation through socialization and networking (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006). Participants in this study mentioned the importance of peer networks and experienced mentors in both the interviews and professional development plans. Interestingly, responses about the effectiveness of principal induction programs were inconsistent among participants from the same dioceses. Support from higher-level administrators, such as the superintendent, also contribute to commitment and job satisfaction in the principalship (Chang et al., 2015; De Jong et al., 2017).

In this study, principals were satisfied with the support they received from central office administrators related to human resources and student issues. Participants were also confident in the legal advice they received from central office. Catholic dioceses are often the target of litigation for a large variety of reasons, so it is likely that diocesan officials are hyper-focused on legal protection. Diverging from previous research on Catholic education leadership (Bigelow, 2017; Nuzzi et al., 2013), this study revealed principals felt supported, but were more frustrated by the lack of diocesan presence and understaffed central offices. Unique to this study are the concerns surrounding curriculum innovation and leveraging resources. Participants wanted more strategic guidance from their central office administrators on utilizing government funding, which is consistent with the recommendations from Defiore et al. (2009). These recommendations state that federal and state funding should be secured by diocesan leadership rather than local leadership.

The catalyst for this study was the recent statistic that 11% of private school principals left the profession during the 2012-2013 school year, and of the 11% of principals who relinquished their positions, those with three to five years of experience had the highest attrition rate (15.3%)(Goldring & Taie, 2014). Not one of the 13 participants mentioned they felt burned out or were contemplating leaving their position.

## **Implications and Recommendations**

Results from the study provide implications for bishops, diocesan central office administrators, pastors, and aspiring elementary principals. This research contributes to a body of literature on the Catholic school principalship written to inspire diocesan leaders, particularly bishops, to recognize the challenges of school leadership and support principals effectively. Based on responses from principals, top-level diocesan leadership could be more engaged in Catholic schools. While not all Catholic youth are present in the Catholic schools, the Catholic schools provide clergy with a captive audience and a prime opportunity for evangelization. The increasing number of non-Catholic and un-churched Catholic children who attend Catholic schools provide an even wider net for evangelization. While some clergy worry about offending families who attend public schools, Catholic elementary principals want their bishop and other clergy to proclaim the good news of Catholic schools loudly.

It is difficult to stay on top of curricular innovations and funding opportunities when the central office is understaffed and underfunded. A vicious cycle of unaddressed goals that affect the quality of Catholic education leads to a decline in enrollment. Diocesan leadership who makes funding decisions must find creative ways to invest in a highly qualified, fully staffed central office of education. This way, central office administrators will have more time for quality educational research and innovation. They will also have more time to engage in school leadership coaching, thus improving the overall academic quality.

Overall, Catholic education leadership pipeline programs are sorely lacking in practical day-to-day support. Principal induction or pipeline programs, which include problem-solving strategies and everyday scenarios, would be more effective (Sutcher et al., 2017). Furthermore, mentoring programs should be replaced with leadership coaches. Master's programs in educational leadership are usually a Catholic elementary principal's introduction to the principalship. Most master's programs are geared toward a public education audience and do not prepare Catholic elementary principals for the challenges of enrollment, marketing, and fundraising. Catholic higher education should consider elective courses for students preparing for Catholic school leadership, as well as highly discounted tuition prices for students who serve in Catholic schools. Higher education in general should also consider a more applied, practitioner-focused curriculum, which enhances students' problem-solving skills while learning the legal and ethical implications of their decisions.

Directors of curriculum or administrators in similar diocesan level curriculum should be aware of the principals' desire for high caliber curriculum innovation. While principals do not want to give up all their autonomy in curriculum development, they value a collaborative approach to curriculum research, implementation, professional development, and funding. The millennial generation of leadership is competitive, earnest, and fearless. Diocesan administrators can and should empower

millennial principals to take leadership on innovative curriculum research. Central office staff may default toward consulting more experienced principals for various reasons; however, the millennials are the future of Catholic leadership. They have a lot of potential and should not be overlooked.

Funding sources are a significant area of concern in this study. In many cases, the pastor or a board of limited jurisdiction holds the purse strings. The pastor has a difficult task balancing what should be spent on the ministry of education versus the other ministries in the parish. It is important that bishops place pastors invested in Catholic education in parishes which have school funding responsibilities. Additionally, every parish should be responsible for funding Catholic schools, even if they do not have a school on their property. Pastors and boards must also be aware of the factors that lead to principal attrition, and they should support their principals by respecting their expertise and giving them appropriate autonomy. Board members not only share their expertise in support of Catholic schools, but they are also responsible for identifying and cultivating funding sources. Similarly, philanthropic organizations that support Catholic schools can do so by providing funding for curricular initiatives and implementation.

Catholic elementary principals face the challenge of funding their vision. Recognizing that central offices are perennially understaffed, principals should collaborate with peers and form networks that reach beyond their own diocese. Principals should find colleagues who wish to implement the same programs and pool resources for professional development. They may also want to explore facilities contracts, such as copiers and janitorial services, collectively to improve purchasing power. Furthermore, principals should form peer networks and professional learning communities to avoid isolation and burnout.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

There are several limitations to this study that should be addressed in future research. First, the study was delimited to the Mideastern region of the United States. Catholic education looks somewhat different on the West Coast and deep South, and it's even more different in the rural Midwest, Alaska, and Hawaii. While the Church is universal, principals in other regions of the country likely face different challenges. Furthermore, not all dioceses in the Mideastern region were invited to participate because their distance was beyond a drivable radius. Five of the six dioceses in this study were fairly small in terms of school numbers, while only one was an Archdiocese. Nearly 40% ( $n = 5$ ) of the participants were from the same diocese and 54% ( $n = 7$ ) were from the same state. The qualitative design provided a snapshot in history of the Catholic elementary principalship. A longitudinal study of Catholic elementary principals has the potential to both shed light on the breaking point for Catholic administrators, and to illuminate the progress of principals successfully implementing their vision. Data collected 10 years from now may look very different depending on the religiosity of the nation and any governmental policy changes to Catholic school

funding.

A strength of the study is the participants' varied number of service years, providing a wide range of perspectives. According to national demographic statistics of Catholic educators, the participants reflect the national average in terms of ethnicity, but not race (Schultz & McDonald, 2018), limiting the generalizability of this study's findings. Only one male principal participated in this study, falling short of the national Catholic educator demographic statistics that have a 12% male population in Catholic elementary schools (Schultz & McDonald, 2018). Approximately 2% of Catholic elementary educators are clergy or religious; however, all participants in this study were lay persons (Schultz & McDonald, 2018). This study was delimited to principals in their second through fifth year, and they were actively employed at the time of the data collection period. Principals who left the principalship during the three to five-year window were not recruited to participate, and therefore the voices of principals who did not persist in the position were omitted and should be included in future research.

One key area of interest presented in the study's findings are the generational differences related to vision and mission. Boomers and older Generation X principals seemed more committed to their respective schools while younger Generation X and millennials had a more competitive edge, thrived on innovative opportunities, and pursued a vision for Catholic education that extended beyond their school. Whether the generational differences found in this study are related to age and experience or characteristics of the generation, research focusing on generational differences specific to the millennial principal's impact on the Catholic education system would be intriguing.

### **Conclusion**

Early career elementary Catholic school principals are motivated to persist in their position because they feel called to Catholic leadership, embody leadership qualities which enable them to find success and feel motivated by their vision for the future. Catholic elementary principals face challenges with resources, finding balance, and managing relationships with personnel and parents. These school leaders describe their quality of support as strong in regard to legal issues, but limited when it comes to teacher supervision, curriculum leadership, leveraging resources, professional development, communication, and diocesan presence.

Despite the many challenges, these great leaders have a vision, and they must be empowered to lead Catholic schools into a bold new future. In less than 10 years, Saint John Neumann, the founder of the first Catholic school system in America, opened 17 Catholic elementary schools, built 89 churches, founded a new religious order, and opened several hospitals and orphanages. Catholic school principals stand on the shoulders of giants. Saint John Neumann and many others who have gone before are living proof that vision and mission are the driving force which grows the Kingdom of God. Just as Saint John Neumann's life was the length of a mere breath in God's

time, Catholic leaders should be reminded that, despite our efforts for Catholic schools to lead the teaching mission of the Church, the Kingdom always lies beyond. *We are prophets of a future not our own Untener (1979).*

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