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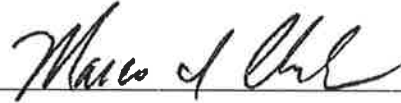
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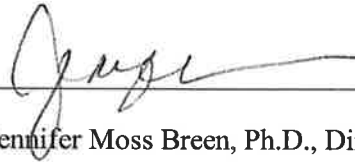
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CATHOLIC IDENTITY IN INDEPENDENT CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

By
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A DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

Submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of Creighton University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in
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Abstract

The changing demographics of elementary Catholic education in the United States has fundamentally shifted the educational landscape. In response to some of these changes, independent Catholic schools have arisen as a viable alternative to the traditional parochial school. This study describes how independent Catholic schools adapt to the changing educational climate while aiming to develop a set of evidence-based recommendations for establishing, maintaining, and communicating Catholic identity. Through a qualitative study utilizing semi-structured interviews, certain implications arose from the research: leadership is critical to all areas, providing a proper orientation to all community members is significant, the school's identity must be articulated and communicated, all programs and planning must be aligned with the mission and facilitate a context for learning, and opportunities for community celebrations and traditions should be created.

Keywords: Catholic identity, independent, leadership, education

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my wonderful wife and our beautiful children. Thank you for supporting me on this journey.

Acknowledgements

In completing this work, there is no shortage of people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude. I would like to recognize St. Gabriel's Catholic School and St. Michael's Catholic Academy for allowing me to conduct my research. For my colleagues, classmates, and friends, thank you for inspiring me and for supporting me through this process. Thank you to Dr. Marco Clark for his role as a committee member and a special thanks is owed to Dr. Tim Guetterman for chairing my committee and guiding me on my work.

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CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE PROBLEM

Introduction and Background

Catholic school identity is of paramount importance to all Catholic schools. Convey (2012) explains Catholic identity as present in both content and culture, so that the religious and general curriculum content, as well as the faith community, rituals, and symbols that comprise the culture, create an identity that is uniquely Catholic. This Catholic identity assures that Catholic schools align with the Catholic Church and permit Catholic schools to develop the whole child, as faith and character development are essential components of a Catholic education (Belmonte & Cranston, 2009). As the Catholic education system faces certain challenges within the changing face of education, there exists a need for serious questioning and reflection on how to maintain a strong sense of Catholic identity in all Catholic schools, especially those that are independent. Independent Catholic schools are not directly affiliated with any religious order or parish. Such schools face a variety of challenges to developing and celebrating their Catholic identity. Recent literature has shown that academics are sometimes equivalent to or valued more than the school's Catholic identity. Fuller and Johnson (2013) assessed the perceptions of mission and Catholic identity at an urban, Catholic high school and found that a collective understanding of that identity was lacking. O'Connell (2012) argues that the mission and Catholic identity must remain at the forefront of all Catholic schools, as the schools are called to a higher purpose. As Catholic schools have evolved, new governance models are being discussed, with the independent model as one option, as many schools shift away from the parochial school model (Haney, 2010). Focusing on Catholic identity within independent Catholic education is significant because of the need

for Catholic schools to retain their Catholic identity while also maintaining, and even improving, their status as schools of excellence.

To complete this study, the researcher engaged in a qualitative, grounded theory study in two independent Catholic schools that operate within the Diocese of Austin, Texas. As an employee of an independent Catholic school in Austin, the researcher had established relationships to the independent Catholic schools. Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher ascertained how independent Catholic schools retain their identity.

Statement of the Problem

The independent model of Catholic education offers challenges to the development and maintenance of a school's Catholic identity. Historically, the parochial model featured the presence of the religious through either the pastor of the attached parish or the presence of religious sisters as teachers. The increase in the number of lay faculty and staff has shifted the responsibility of maintaining the schools' Catholic identity to the laity, which is especially true in an independent Catholic school with no founding religious order. The focus of this research will be to identify what independent, Catholic schools do to retain that Catholic identity. This study evaluated the role of particular stakeholders, including faculty and parents, in independent Catholic schools. Ultimately, this study contributes to developing a solution to this problem by identifying successful strategies.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, grounded theory dissertation in practice study was to describe how independent Catholic schools adapt to changing times while still retaining their identity for independent Catholic schools in the Diocese of Austin, Texas.

Research Question(s) and Hypotheses

Since the 1960s, there has been a steady decrease in the number of religious present within Catholic schools. Currently, less than three percent of full-time professional staff in Catholic schools are religious or clergy (National Catholic Educational Association, 2016). The shift from religious to laity has caused schools to look critically at how to convey Catholic identity effectively and meaningfully, a fact that is further illustrated by the publication of Loyola University's (2012) *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools*. While these standards and benchmarks offer a set of universal criteria, each Catholic school is unique in its culture, programming, and community; furthermore, these criteria are generally seen as good practice but not necessarily required protocol for schools to follow. The following research question will guide this qualitative study:

Research question: As independent Catholic schools emerge as a viable model for Catholic education, how do they establish and maintain their Catholic identity?

Aim of the Study

This study aims to design a set of evidence-based recommendations for establishing, maintaining, and communicating Catholic identity within independent Catholic schools in central Texas.

Methodology

This qualitative study was completed through semi-structured interviews with school administrative and board leaders, teachers, parents, and students. A qualitative approach was selected because of its flexibility to adapt to the different school communities and participants. As each school varies greatly in a number of facets, a qualitative approach allowed the study to gain a deep understanding of each school and how Catholic identity is locally engaged. Furthermore, a qualitative approach provides data regarding the role of individuals, which is appropriate and effective because of the significance of individuals within education in both building community and educating others.

Definition of Relevant Terms

The vernacular of Catholic education also includes terminology that is found within general education. Catholic education, however, also possesses certain terms that are unique. These terms are often used in general conversation, long-range planning and benchmarking, and also in this research. The following terms were used operationally within this study:

Catholic identity: The extent to which a school is centered on the person of Jesus Christ, sustained by Gospel witness, contributes to the evangelizing mission of the Church, shaped by community and communion, distinguished by excellence, committed to educating the whole child, steeped in a Catholic worldview, accessible to all students, and established by the expressed authority of the Bishop. In practice, identity is the execution of practices that illustrate the manifestation of who the school claims to be; in other words, selecting actions that are mission, vision, and value-aligned.

Parochial: A Catholic school that is directly connected or affiliated with a Catholic parish where the pastor is the ultimate head of both school and church.

Independent Catholic school: A Catholic school that exists as an independent financial institution yet falls under the auspices of the (arch)diocese because of its status as a Catholic institution.

Religious: Priests and sisters.

Laity: Lay people that are not priests or sisters.

Catholic education: Elementary and secondary Catholic schools.

Enrollment: Number of students enrolled within the school.

Clearly understanding the terms above and relying on the same definitions for any clarification will allow for a greater level of reliability when interviewing participants.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Personal Biases

As with any study, delimitations are inherent to the work. For example, applications for this research may exist only to independent Catholic schools within a particular Diocese, as each holds its own superintendent and diocesan office, as well as geographically-dictated conditions, such as family demographics, public and private school competition, and socioeconomic status. As the study focuses on independent Catholic schools, the information is not applicable to all independent schools, as independent schools are not necessarily Catholic. This study is driven by the current time and situation facing Catholic schools, so this information may not be applicable in future years as technology progresses and variables within education progress.

Within this particular study, certain limitations also exist. As this study will occur in a particular period of time, current social and economic factors will influence some of

the responses from the participants. With legislation for school choice currently pending, the nature of Catholic school enrollment may very well be significantly altered in the future. Additionally, the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews may be influenced by the interviewer, so the interviews were structured to build rapport with the participant in order to minimize the influence of the interviewer.

Personal bias of the researcher must be avoided to maximum extent possible. The researcher's personal knowledge of the schools may pose ethical considerations, as the relationship of the researcher to the school may influence how some information is viewed. Through axial coding and vetted interview questions, the researcher sought to avoid personal bias in the reporting of the data. As personal bias may also arise through the questioning or follow-up questioning during an actual interview, the vetted questions also included potential follow-up questions. Additionally, member checking was used to validate further the analyses developed from the collected data, and prolonged time in the field by the researcher helps to increase the research's validation.

The Role of Leadership in this Study

In researching Catholic identity within Catholic independent schools, the focus on leadership emerged as a significant theme, in no small part because of the lack of religious staff employed by Catholic schools. Through the semi-structured interviews, the study hoped to understand what strategy or leadership style lend themselves best to enriching the school's Catholic identity. Because of the researcher's role as a Catholic school administrator, this information will certainly inform future leadership decisions, styles, and strategies, as this study sought to identify strategies that can be successful across different schools and communities.

As each independent Catholic school in the study has a Head of School or President or Principal that reports directly to the board, each position will be interviewed to gauge their own perception of their role in establishing and maintaining the Catholic identity of their schools. The common thought is that the lead administrator within a Catholic school is also the spiritual leader within the community, so each school leader was asked about that perception and their opinions regarding it.

A large part of the coding involved leadership research and the perceptions of community stakeholders regarding their current leader and their hopes or expectations for that leader. As this research was meant to engage and not evaluate the leadership, the researcher focused solely on the leadership strategies that have been successful in establishing the Catholic identity.

Significance of the Dissertation in Practice Study

In an ever-increasing field of lay teachers and staff, Catholic identity remains a key differentiator from other models of education, both public and private. In strengthening the understanding of that differentiator, Catholic educators and its supports will serve to benefit from such information. Within the research of Catholic schools, studies that focus solely on independent Catholic schools is lacking. Additionally, retaining Catholic identity in modern society remains a highly-focused theme of Catholic school leadership preparation, as the recent trend indicates that the laity, rather than the religious, will continue to shoulder a significant load in developing the Catholic identity of the school. This study serves to develop both of these areas.

This study will help improve practice within Catholic education because independent schools may very well become more popular as schools close and merge.

As that process unfolds, it is beneficial to understand what exactly a school can do to ensure its sense of Catholic identity is strong. If school leaders understand how to implement and improve Catholic identity, then Catholic schools will be stronger academically and spiritually.

In addition to stronger schools in practice, this research aids policy development by identifying and explaining what strategies have been successful in building a culture and community of strong Catholic identity. While national standards for Catholic schools are published, they function more as a best practices application rather than a required set of expectations. If superintendents or school boards wish to require particular Catholic identity strategies, this research informs them as to what works and what has been shown to be less successful.

Summary

Catholic schools have forever adapted to the political, societal, and economic climates and have thrived in doing so. Throughout all of these adaptations, however, the unifying theme of Catholic identity can be found in all successful Catholic schools. As the current environment facing Catholic schools is one of school closings and often merging, a decline in the number of available religious, and a continuation of a drop in enrollment, independent models of Catholic education have experienced success. Within this model, however, there exists the question of how to sustain and strengthen the Catholic identity of the school.

The purpose of this study was to describe how independent Catholic schools in Austin, Texas, adapt to changing times while still retaining their Catholic identity. This was done by conducting a qualitative study on how independent Catholic schools are

adapting to changing times while still retaining their Catholic identity. The researcher used semi-structured interviews to collect information regarding Catholic identity in schools from community stakeholders, including administrators, parents, and students.

Such a study, however, brought certain limitations, such as applying only to independent Catholic schools and focusing on the area of Central Texas. Furthermore, as with any interview, the potential for the interviewer to affect the data exists. Ultimately, however, this research should help to inform the leadership of Catholic schools and provide a guide for establishing and strengthening Catholic identity at an independent Catholic school.

This is a significant study because the declining role of religious within Catholic education has forced to the laity the responsibility of ensuring for and sustaining the Catholic identity of Catholic schools. There does not exist a tremendous amount of literature that focuses solely on independent Catholic schools. As these models can be found nationwide, knowing better and more deeply how to sustain and strengthen Catholic identity will help ensure the longevity of Catholic education.

CHAPTER TWO: PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Catholic education seeks to develop students both academically and spiritually. To understand how Catholic identity within independent, Catholic schools can be evaluated, it is imperative to understand both the origins of Catholic education and the current state of Catholic education in America. While Catholic education began with a desire to preserve cultural identity in a new country, modern challenges, such as enrollment drops and declining number of religious faculty and staff, led to the creation of different models of Catholic education, such as independent Catholic schools. At the crux of Catholic education, Catholic identity serves as a pivotal focus for all Catholic schools. The following literature review will present findings about Catholic education, the different models of Catholic education that have come into existence, the role of Catholic identity within independent Catholic schools, and leadership within Catholic schools.

Literature about Catholic Education

Catholic education seeks to deliver a faith-based education program that develops the whole child in order to prepare them both spiritually and academically. While noble in mission, the system of Catholic education has experienced a variety of challenges from the mid to late-twentieth century to the current time. Declining enrollment, rising costs, changing demographics, and increased competition have caused those within Catholic education to continue to change and adapt to shifts within society. There has emerged a number of new models of Catholic education, all of which are aimed at delivering a service that ultimately seeks a higher purpose.

Catholic schools initially sought to maintain the cultural and religious connection of the immigrant population to the old world as they adjusted to life in America. Throughout the formation of Catholic education, the themes of survival of faith, immigration, adaptability, community, and identity are prevalent (Walch, 1996). With its origins in attempting to convert Native Americans and colonists to the establishment of “national” parishes that maintain cultural identity, Catholic education largely fought to strengthen and spread the Catholic faith in an environment that exhibited largely anti-Catholic sentiment. A pivotal moment in American Catholic education occurred in Saint Elizabeth Bayley Seton’s establishment of a religious order that provided a framework for successful school establishment and management (Walch, 1996; Kealey & Kealey, 2003). The 1800s and early 1900s saw continued growth from religious orders, legal battles concerning the rights of parents to select their child’s form of education, and various models of public funding for Catholic schools that differed from state to state.

Modern Catholic education, however, has faced two major enrollment declines. The historical high of 5.5 million students enrolled in Catholic elementary and high schools in 1965 fell to 4.86 million in 1970 and 2.653 million in 2000; similarly, the 2000s experienced a similar drop, as national enrollment fell 2.12 million in 2009 (DeFiore, 2011; James, 2007). The 2015-2016 school year had a national enrollment of 1.9 million (NCEA, 2016). From 2006 to 2016, there is a net decrease of 1,064 school and 409,384 students nationwide (NCEA, 2016). Throughout these drops in enrollment, the schools also faced a demographic shift, as the largely white Catholic population emigrated from urban to suburban areas (James, 2007). With such a shift in

demographics, there arose a new need for suburban Catholic schools and parishes, where fewer existed.

The decline of enrollment, however, is far from the only challenge currently facing Catholic education. Since the 1960s, schools have faced a declining religious population and an increasing number of lay professionals that populate the teaching faculty and staff; what was once a strength of the schools is no longer apparent. In 1965, schools were largely staffed by religious, but in 2016, laity comprise 97.2% of professional staff with religious/clergy making up only 2.8% (NCEA, 2016).

DeFiore (2011) notes that the Catholic Church is not a model of current organizational effectiveness; similarly, the variety of current Catholic school models indicates different responses to the changing times and conditions. The traditional parochial school model is still very much in existence and found nationwide. Because of the dramatic shifts in enrollment and demographics, the parishes have increasingly reduced their educational subsidies to the schools and have pushed the cost of educating students within a Catholic parochial school to the parents with increased tuition (James, 2007). Inter-parish schools are sometimes referred to as regional schools and are sponsored by a collection of parishes that are in close, geographic proximity (Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2013). Unlike a parochial school, the diocesan model is not part of a specific parish but rather fall under the auspices of the diocese and the bishop through the superintendent (James, 2007).

P-12 schools and university partner schools can be considered nontraditional Catholic schools because of their departure from the original parochial model. A P-12 school has a group of elementary schools connected with one particular high school, and

a university partner school has a specific elementary or high school connected with a local Catholic university (Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2013). A faith-inspired charter school, however, cannot be considered a Catholic school because of the lack of inclusion of religion throughout the actual school day; instead, these schools, which may even exist within a parish or former Catholic school building, are able to offer religious education only before or after school (Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2013). A faith-inspired charter school offers a values-based education to low-income students.

In the consortium model of Catholic schools, a group of Catholic schools are grouped together and exercise shared resources, including administration, finances, and policies (Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2013). Private schools, sponsored by a religious order, are unlike a parochial school because the board has direct authority and does not act in a solely consultative manner (James, 2007; Sheehan, 1997). Governed similarly to private schools, private network schools exist within national associations of a particular brand of schools that exercise similar missions and practices (Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2013). The national association does not own the private network schools but does ensure compliance with mission, vision, and practice.

Independent, Catholic education provides yet another alternative to the traditional parochial model. An independent, Catholic school is a private school that is owned by a lay organization (Goldschmidt & Walsh, 2013). Owned by lay organizations, independent, Catholic schools must focus on developing and sustaining a Catholic identity that pervades the school, its mission, and its community. Amidst the plethora of Catholic school models, there exists the theme of institutionalism, in which the governance structure and expectations of the Catholic Church and earlier models of

Catholic schools guide the formation of future and innovative Catholic schools. This ideal brings to the forefront the necessity of having a strong Catholic identity in order to deliver a true, authentic Catholic school experience that meets the changing needs of a student body filled with shifting demographics. While they once existed to serve immigrant populations and maintain the culture of certain ethnic groups, Catholic schools now serve and celebrate a mixed and diverse student population (Hunt, Oldenski, & Wallace, 2000).

Enrollment is an established metric of school success. Economic stability and sustainability are additional indicators of institutional success. James (2007) notes that fear-based decisions revolving around financial concerns drove certain regions within the United States to prohibit any new construction of Catholic schools. In the midst of facing enrollment and financial concerns, Catholic school leadership shows itself to be pivotal in facilitating institutional growth and stability. Within each of the aforementioned models, including those long-established and those more recently developed, leaders are tasked with maintaining the Catholic identity of the school within the school's framework.

Catholic school identity is of paramount importance to all Catholic schools. Faith and character development are essential components of a Catholic education (Belmonte & Cranston, 2009). Catholic schools also face a variety of challenges to developing and celebrating that Catholic identity that may result in prioritizing academic excellence above that identity. Academics, for example, are sometimes equivalent to or valued more than the school's Catholic identity. Fuller and Johnson (2013) assessed the perceptions of mission and Catholic identity at an urban, Catholic high school and found that a collective understanding of that identity had not been found at that particular high school.

Accomplished Catholic educators, such as O'Connell (2012), argue that the mission and Catholic identity must remain at the forefront of all Catholic schools, as the schools are called to a higher purpose. Ultimately, this dichotomy forces to the front the question of how Catholic schools can adapt to changing times while still retaining their faith identity.

Literature about the Professional Practice Setting

On August 10, 1995, the Catholic Diocese of Austin granted permission to an organization of prominent lay leaders to build a new Catholic elementary and middle school in southwest Austin. Based on the agreement, a Texas non-profit corporation was formed to own and operate the School. The School's mission, religious formation, and curriculum would be accountable to the Bishop of Austin, who is the ecclesiastical authority of the Apostolic See pursuant to the Canon Law of the Catholic Church. It would operate under the vigilance of the Diocesan Office of Education and Superintendent of Catholic Schools.

The formal agreement with the Most Reverend John McCarthy, Bishop of Austin, established key elements of the School's purpose, mission, and eventual mode of operation. The School was expected to have high academic standards and admit students who could meet those standards. It was to operate as an independent regional school without belonging to any one constituency, parish, or neighborhood. The agreement further stated that the School would admit students regardless of race, national origin or religion, and set aside funds, as the budget permitted, for financial assistance. The result of this agreement was St. Gabriel's Catholic School, founded in 1999 in Austin, Texas, as an independent, regional Catholic school owned and operated by a Texas non-profit corporation.

The mission statement of St. Gabriel's Catholic School states, "St. Gabriel's Catholic School educates students in a Christ-centered environment that fosters character formation through scholastic excellence and physical, emotional, and spiritual growth" (St. Gabriel's Catholic School, 2016, p. 2). The goal is to instill in each student a lasting love of learning and a lifetime commitment to Christian values and service. St. Gabriel's Catholic School philosophy of education is to support the parents of the students in building the character and faith of their children through academic excellence, moral and spiritual development, and community service. St. Gabriel's Catholic School provides a child-centered learning environment that celebrates each child's individuality while fostering excellence in arts, academics, and athletics. Excellence is achieved by addressing both the student's strengths and weaknesses. The legacy of the educational programs at St. Gabriel's Catholic School is a mastery of content, creative problem solving, and a love of learning. (St. Gabriel's Catholic School, 2016).

Leadership Literature

The relevant leadership literature addresses two major themes: Changes in leadership and the role of leadership in developing Catholic identity. Leadership within Catholic education has changed significantly over the past sixty years. The history of Catholic education, then, plays a pivotal role in influencing the Catholic identity of schools because of this change in leadership. Replacing the religious faculty, lay leaders now face rising costs, declining enrollment, and increased competition from other private educational systems, as well as the existing public schools. Ultimately, the leadership of an independent Catholic school focuses on much more than simply what occurs within the classroom. Lowney (2003) defines a leader as "a person who understands what he or

she values and wants, who is anchored by certain principles, and who faces the world with a consistent outlook” (p. 19). The independent Catholic school leader must be anchored by the tenets of the Catholic faith in order to operate the school in a manner that aligns with the Catholic Church. Haslam, Reicher, and Platow (2011) posit the idea that a leader both constructs and embeds the identity of the group. Within an independent, Catholic school, the leadership must seek to create, sustain, and embed the Catholic identity of the school.

The role of leadership in establishing, developing, and maintain Catholic identity is a key component in today’s Catholic schools. Hobbie, Convey, and Schuttloffel (2010) found that strong school leadership had a positive relationship to a strong sense of Catholic identity, as well as a direct effect on the vitality of the school. Programs dedicated to growing Catholic school leaders have arisen throughout the United States in response to the growing need. McNiff (1999) writes of one such program that focuses on the areas of prayer leadership, commitment to Catholic social teaching, growing one’s own faith, and providing quality professional development. Spesia (2016) argues for Catholic school leaders to view themselves as missionary disciples that seek to make disciples through their work. Clearly, the role of a Catholic school administrator extends beyond the day-to-day management of a school and includes the leadership responsibility on a spiritual level.

A school’s Catholic identity is a key component of a successful, Catholic school. While part of a school’s Catholicity may be more challenging to support with data, there is much that can be done through outlining and defining measurable outcomes for school goals as part of a collaborative process of establishing nonnegotiable goals (Marzano &

Waters, 2009). The role of the leadership in establishing these goals and holding others accountable is significant. Lowney (2003) discusses the value of leading with love, as doing so offers the ability to recognize others for their true talents and not be swayed by bias or prejudice, but leaders also have a need to be representative of the group and also viewed as someone who is working to promote the group as a whole (Haslam et al., 2011).

In focusing on the Catholic identity of an independent, Catholic school, assessing the leadership on its ability to collaborate on developing and ultimately to create and embed the Catholic identity will be an overreaching theme. Additionally, identifying how the leadership style of school leaders affects the school's Catholic identity will be significant.

Summary

Modern-day Catholic education has undergone significant changes from its origins as a means of preserving cultural identity among immigrants. While still focusing on spiritual and academic development, Catholic identity now faces changing demographics among potential families and other academic choices. With a decreasing number of religious faculty and staff, lay individuals have risen to leadership roles within Catholic education. In addition to the shifting roles of the laity, Catholic schools have also faced increasing financial and enrollment challenges. These challenges have been met with alternative forms of Catholic education, ranging from the traditional parochial model to independent models.

Evaluating the Catholic identity of independent, Catholic schools is a topic of interest, however, as current trends in Catholic education have schools shifting away

from parochial models. As that shift becomes more popular, recognizing how to establish Catholic identity successfully in a lay-driven school similarly increases in significance. While the literature has focused on the different models of education and the significance of Catholic identity within Catholic schools, the literature does not focus heavily on independent, Catholic schools. The literature does explain the form and functions of different models of Catholic schools, as well as citing the numerous challenges facing modern Catholic education.

With the challenges facing Catholic education, such as enrollment declines, financial challenges, and decreasing religious faculty, identifying new models that are successful in leadership, sustainability, academic development, and Catholic identity will be critical in guiding this next chapter of Catholic education in America.

CHAPTER THREE: PROJECT METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In seeking to describe how independent Catholic schools retain their Catholic identity while also adapting to changing educational, fiscal, and societal environments, this research seeks to provide an understanding of how the Catholicity of a school remains not just present but vibrant and alive. As the number of clergy employed by Catholic schools has drastically decreased and the number of lay faculty has risen, Catholic schools currently face a challenge of maintaining a Catholic environment and culture in order to provide the true essence of a Catholic education without the benefit of a surplus of religious readily available.

Focusing specifically on independent Catholic schools in central Texas, this research took a qualitative approach for a number of reasons. The natural setting in which qualitative research occurs provides additional opportunities for observations, which helps guide a deeper understanding of the general themes. A qualitative approach, specifically through a grounded theory approach, permits the researcher to build patterns and themes from ground up through data analysis (Creswell, 2014). This approach eliminates much of the bias that may be brought to this problem and instead provide an evidence-based solution to this problem. Additionally, this approach offered a holistic account of the problem, which may exceed the parameters of the questions posed through the interview protocol. This holistic account will be built through the multiple perspectives of the interviews and will help the emerging larger themes (Creswell, 2014).

In presenting the collected information, it is imperative to explain all connections between the researcher and the participants (Creswell, 2014). As the research was done in

schools and with school leaders with whom the researcher has a connection, the researcher must demonstrate how the data has not been compromised and rely on multiple strategies to ensure validity (Creswell, 2014).

Research Question

Since Vatican II, there has been a steady decrease in the number of religious present within Catholic schools. Currently, less than three percent of full-time professional staff in Catholic schools are religious or clergy (National Catholic Educational Association, 2016). The shift from religious to laity has caused schools to look critically at how to convey Catholic identity effectively and meaningfully, a fact that is further illustrated by the publication of Loyola University's (2012) *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools*. While these standards and benchmarks offer a set of universal criteria, each Catholic school is unique in its culture, programming, and community; furthermore, these criteria are generally seen as good practice but not necessarily required protocol for schools to follow. The following research question will guide this qualitative study:

Research question: As independent Catholic schools emerge as a viable model for Catholic education, how do they establish and maintain their Catholic identity?

Research Design

The approach for finding an evidence-based solution to the research problem was a qualitative study guided by grounded theory. This qualitative approach was done through semi-structured interviews that were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed. The qualitative approach is appropriate for this challenge because the school experiences involves much more than simply academics; this is especially true in a

Catholic school that seeks to develop the whole child. As a result, using a qualitative approach to identifying strategies or programs that retain the Catholic identity proves to be the most effective manner. The nature of schools lends itself to the qualitative approach because it allows the researcher to observe all components of the school.

Participants/Data Sources and Recruitment

The participants for this study included independent Catholic school leaders and stakeholders, including parents and teachers. All participants were affiliated with independent Catholic schools in Austin, Texas. In order to complete the semi-structured interviews with a sample of the population, a purposeful sampling approach was used. This approach ensured that the different subgroups of teachers, administrators, and parents were represented fairly. The entire population was aggregated and then a purposeful selection from each subgroup was performed. The sample was directly involved with one of the two independent Catholic schools in Austin, Texas. In order to complete this study, it was necessary to receive permission from both Heads of School to conduct the research with the respective populations. Both school sites used for research are independent, Catholic schools that are directly adjacent to each other but exist as two separate entities, united only by their relationship as Catholic schools.

Data Collection Tools

Through this qualitative study, semi-structured interviews were conducted using a stratified random sampling of the population. The interview protocol (see Appendix) includes five questions focusing on background information and eleven questions focusing on Catholic identity and Catholic education. Some examples of questions are as follows:

- Explain your perception of the purpose of Catholic education.
- Explain your perception of Catholic identity, as it relates to Catholic education.
- How does your school convey its Catholic identity to parents? Students?
Faculty/staff? Stakeholders?

In using an interview protocol, the data collected increased in reliability, as the conversations were focused on particular topics. The semi-structured interview protocol was appropriate because it aligns with the grounded theory approach to qualitative research, as the data collected was then coded to identify and categorize emerging core themes that provided an evidence-based solution to the problem of retaining Catholic identity. Interviews ranged between thirty and sixty minutes.

Additionally, the researcher learned the culture more clearly through a detailed reading and observation of school documents, including the handbooks, annual reports, and strategic plans.

Data Collection Procedures

Participant recruitment occurred through an email inviting participants to be interviewed. Through electronic correspondence, interview times were established and completed. Of the total 13 participants, 12 were current or former parents of students in Catholic education, five were current or former teachers, and ten were current or former administrators. The interviews were recorded digitally, which were then transcribed using Temi.com. The transcripts were then analyzed using a software program, MAXQDA. The analyzing software served as the primary source of data organization for analysis. The data was then categorized using open coding in order to develop core themes that emerge. From the themes that emerged through open coding, I moved to

axial coding, which enabled me to identify a central phenomenon while also exploring causal conditions, specifying strategies, and outlining the consequences (Creswell, 2014). These themes were applied to the state of independent Catholic education and the challenges faced in modern society.

As I collected the data, it is significant to know that I work in Catholic education and have worked closely with both independent Catholic schools in Austin for the past six years. I have worked in three schools in the Diocese of Austin for the past eleven years and have an intimate working knowledge of many schools because of my work on accreditation teams, as both a principal and teacher. Having participated in two graduate school programs designed to promote and sustain Catholic education, I may bring to the research the bias of what I was taught on how to teach, work, and lead in a Catholic school.

Ethical Considerations

IRB approval was obtained prior to the start of any research in order to ensure that the plan aligned with the expectations of Creighton University. As part of the IRB process, I have successfully completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program).

The limitations of this approach will exist in the ability of participants to recall specific events, feelings, or results of school programming or decisions. As some individuals did also not participate equally, particular viewpoints may be lost. The presence of the researcher may also influence the responses of interviews. Information was provided indirectly and passed through the lens/viewpoint of the speakers. Because I am focusing on schools in Central Texas, I have pre-established professional

relationships with the different schools, as I have a working familiarity with all schools in and around the greater Austin area. As I collected, coded, and analyzed my data, I relied on the proper protocols for collection and analysis, so that my personal opinions or experiences did not influence the theory development.

Collected information was stored on both hard drives and in online servers for one year. Participants were made aware of the data storage period, collection procedures, and the anticipated publication process during the beginning of the interviews protocol (see Appendix).

Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded digitally and then transcribed using Temi.com. The data was coded using open coding and constant comparative methods so as to identify prevalent and emerging themes consistent throughout the interviews. I used a qualitative analysis software, MAXQDA. From the themes that emerged through open coding, axial coding was then employed in order to identify a central category. Additionally, axial coding and constant comparative methods allowed me to explore causal conditions, determine strategies, and outline the consequences (Creswell, 2014). Axial coding allowed the data to be separated into core themes, which related to each other, and ultimately indicated general themes or ideas that appear consistently. The core themes that were generated through the axial coding process were used to establish working, practical theories of maintaining Catholic identity in Catholic schools.

Validity Checks

I relied on member checks to validate my data and increase reliability. While initial data was not returned to the interview participants, the open coding analysis was

sent back to participants in order for them to approve my interpretation and also note any discrepancies. Substantial time in the field will also serve as another strategy for increasing validity.

Reflections of the Researcher

In making the transition to an independent Catholic school from my previous experiences within parochial education, I was initially excited by the latitude afforded to an organization that worked singularly toward the purpose of being the best school possible. In parochial education, the school is sometimes at odds with the parish and must lobby to use shared spaces or particular funds; I was pleasantly surprised to see that not the case at an independent Catholic school. That singular focus, however, felt as though it sometime came at the expense of being directly tied to a particular parish and thus a source of undeniable Catholic identity. Because of this, I initially struggled with how to make my faith and my work tie together more directly and powerfully, something that felt easier somehow while working at a parochial school.

Through this process, I sought to gain an understanding of how I can work to develop better the Catholic identity of my own school while also growing in my personal faith through my profession. Such an understanding can certainly inform other leaders of independent, Catholic schools to lead more effectively and intentionally. The sad truth is that we do not have the number of religious working in our schools that we once had, so the responsibility falls more than ever on to the shoulders of the laity to live out our Catholic faith.

Throughout this entire program, I have felt as though my school work at Creighton has helped me grow in my own faith and in my leadership. Independent

Catholic schools often do not have a founding order, so studying at Creighton and being able to immerse myself in the Jesuit experience through my electives was a wonderful academic and spiritual gift. For me, working in Catholic schools and seeking to improve them through my own research will benefit me in ways that may not be readily observable, as I see this endeavor to be not just of learning but of faith, as well.

Summary

I am relying on a grounded theory in order to develop a theory of how Catholic schools retain their Catholic identity. In order to explore how independent Catholic schools retain their Catholic identity while also adapting to the changing times, I used a qualitative approach and conducted semi-structured interviews to gather data. This approach provided a fresh approach to a problem that has increased in prevalence as the percentage of religious that work in Catholic education has dropped dramatically over the past fifty years.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

In seeking to describe how independent Catholic schools retain their Catholic identity while also adapting to changing educational, fiscal, and societal environments, six salient themes emerged from the data collection and analysis: Exercising intentionality in planning, scheduling, and organizing; providing context to the faith in educational and real-world application; recognizing, communicating, and celebrating identity; leadership as the embodiment of faith and the school's mission; developing a strong community and culture; and facilitating an engaging spiritual journey for all community members. Each theme speaks to the involvement of the Catholic faith and how it affects or influences the Catholic identity of a school. Additionally, the themes revolve around actions or practices that are viewed as successful in establishing, maintaining, and growing Catholic identity within independent, Catholic schools. Each of these themes also speaks to the essence of adaptability within independent education to the evolving landscape facing K-12 education in America.

Exercising Intentionality in Planning, Scheduling, and Organizing

Perhaps the most prominent theme and also one that pervades all other themes is the idea of intentionality within all that is done by the school. In essence, participants spoke to schools' being intentional and strategic in planning so that the lens of the Catholic faith is applied to all communications, events, and actions, including onboarding of new families, teachers, and students to the school community. As one participant stated, "everyone has to understand exactly what we're doing and why we're doing it" (parent). From this understanding also stems an alignment on all fronts for the school.

From onboarding new employees and students, to scheduling events and maintaining fidelity to the liturgical calendar, to classroom pedagogy, intentionality consistently arose as a significant theme in influencing Catholic identity.

Multiple participants referenced the preparation of teachers new to the school or new to Catholic education. Multiple recommendations were made for professional development for new faculty regarding the history and purpose of Catholic education (administrators). Others spoke to the need of similar preparation and explanation for new students (administrator). Ultimately, developing teachers through a clarification of expectations for faculty so as to how best to convey the school's Catholic identity pointed to a need to unify and align teachers to the mission of the school. As stated by one participant, clarifying expectations and preparing teachers, families, and students includes "articulating that in a way that's understandable to new people who come on board" (administrator). For some, that may be outlining what different liturgical celebrations may look like, such as a rosary or Mass celebration. With faculty that are new to Catholic education, the onus falls to the school to prepare teachers to deliver a Catholic education. Preparing teachers adequately enables the school to deliver the families a more authentic experience that, ideally, aligns with all other aspects of the school, such as the calendar.

Concern regarding the intentionality of the school calendar plays a key role in the overall idea of whole school alignment. Multiple participants focused on calendar events as crucial to maintaining fidelity to the school's Catholic identity (administrators). The concern that was most often cited was having the Catholicity of the school being dictated by particular events, as opposed to the ideal situation of the Catholicity driving the events. Intentionality with respect to scheduling events or looking at the school calendar

sought to place a stronger emphasis on selecting events because of their significance or appropriateness, especially within the liturgical calendar.

Adhering to the liturgical calendar intentionally provides multiple avenues of accentuating the school's Catholic identity. Holy days of obligation, for example, can serve a two-fold purpose: Primarily, keeping and honoring them reinforces the school's status as a Catholic institution; secondarily, holy days can serve as teachable moments to learn about the Church's traditions. Some believe fully in being intentional with liturgical celebrations, such as teaching masses, to help onboard new families and students. Teachable masses provide all participants an opportunity to understand all that is done, both how and why, within the Mass, which is central to Catholicism. Intentional scheduling that adheres to the liturgical calendar promotes awareness of the Church's celebrations while also providing consistency and foundation for the school's Catholic identity. The foundational aspects of intentionality begin with onboarding and scheduling but also include the actual instruction in the classroom.

Participants spoke to the need to integrate Catholicism into the classroom as thoughtfully and mindfully as scheduling events. Catholic identity should be integrated into instruction in the same manner as innovation and Science-Technology-Engineering-Arts-Mathematics (STEAM). Innovation and STEAM education are prevalent within both schools surveyed as they seek to compete with area non-Catholic, independent schools. To maintain that mission and identity fidelity, intentional instruction from the words used to how we develop relationships with students can set independent, Catholic schools apart.

Throughout all aspects of intentionality, the consensus on intentionally developing Catholic identity may best be summarized by one administrator who stated, “I also think that what makes us Catholic is that we live our faith all day... and we talk a lot about what it means to be Catholic and we make decisions through that lens a lot.” Using that lens to drive onboarding, scheduling, or teaching, Catholic identity automatically permeates all that is done by a school. A Head of School at an independent, Catholic high school, explains, “We embrace Catholicism... we demonstrate that embracing in a variety of ways not the least of which is heralding our mission as a Christ-based...Catholic school.” Whole school embracement of such a philosophy dramatically illustrates the extent to which a school can stay true to its mission through a mindful adherence to Catholic identity and full program alignment.

Providing Context to the Faith in Educational and Real-World Application

The second theme that arose in the analysis of data is the theme of providing context to the faith in both an educational and real-world application. Multiple participants cited the presence of Catholic identity within a school to exist in the extent to which the Catholic faith was applied to or given particular context. Providing such a context to education also arose as an innate component of Catholic education. As one administrator states, “I think Catholic schools speak to the holistic human experience so that we give context to learning by positioning it alongside faith formation.” This holistic human experience seeks to develop students in all aspects so that they can understand how their faith applies throughout all situations and ultimately motivates them to effect change in their own lives and the lives of others based on their educational experiences. A middle school administrator summarizes this point in her statement: “[I]mpart the

teachings of the church broadly so that these students incorporated that in their philosophies not just separating academic learning at school from... a religious learning but to integrate these into the lives and to live that out.” While the integration of faith and academics consistently arose as a salient point of thought for those interviewed, the emphasis on applying faith contextually appeared in discussions of academics, experience, holistic child development, and morality.

While the purpose of Catholic education was frequently described as educating children in both faith and academics, “the purpose of Catholic education [as] educat[ing] children well but within the lens of a Catholic identity of Catholic beliefs” (administrator). Furthermore, Catholic identity within academics “doesn't take away from the subjects that we teach it just enhances the subjects that we teach” (administrator). In enhancing the academic curriculum, however, there exists a need to keep the theology program modern and current. The academic context of the faith must be developmentally-appropriate and relevant to their own lives. One parent specifically mentions ensuring the parallelism of academic growth with the development of the child. This matching of academics and developmental readiness bleeds into the educational experience.

Lobbying for an educational experience that allows students to use context to determine fidelity to self, one parent explains, “you almost become unapologetic and unwavering in the identity that you want not only to have while your students are there but I think more importantly what your students are going to do once they leave here. That's what that's what you want. You want them you want this to be a place where they figure it out.” In experiencing a strong Catholic identity, the students become formed in

many ways and are able to develop within themselves a certain fortitude and independence. This is done through a particular educational experience that represents the Church because Catholic schools “believe what the Catholic Church sets forth and want to provide a vehicle an educational vehicle for students to experience it” (administrator). Strong Catholic identity within an independent, Catholic school fosters an experience that provides context to faith and academics in each other, as well as opportunities for service to fulfill the Church’s calling to serve mankind; all the while, such an experience seeks to cultivate the whole child.

The holistic approach supports a strong sense of Catholic identity because of its focus on social justice, morality, and honing empathy skills while developing passions for service. In developing a strong moral foundation, Catholic schools also seek to cultivate those that are prudent in decision-making and who will stand up and say and do the right thing when the time comes” (administrator). Additionally, multiple participants addressed the idea of forming global citizens, especially as the schools compete with other independent schools. Creating global citizens as part of a school’s Catholicity aligns with the mission because of the desire to “help mold faith-filled well-rounded global citizens who can have a mindful purpose in their dealings with humankind or humanity” (administrator). Seemingly, the hope is to provide an appropriate context for education and faith that allows students to become agents of change for good as guided by the Catholic faith.

Being guided by the Catholic faith in all areas includes a focus on the moral developmental of each child. As one parent states, “I think the identity piece is having this foundational understanding of what it means to be a moral and just person.” The

instruction of morality appeared in both the academic classroom and also in outside service opportunities and exposures. A Head of School supports this idea in stating, “Catholic identity requires us to invert the funnel and the more educated you are the more you identify the more trained you are really the greater your scope for action becomes. And so it's not an isolated; it should be not; education should not be isolated.” Thus, moral development is not simply an academic pursuit but one that is grounded on action and driven by the teachings of the Catholic Church. A parent that has supported both independent, Catholic schools in Austin spoke to moral development as preparation for the real world when she said, “The academic side is an easy side and I know that I think as a parent a little bit as that bubble you know keeping the world out... I would say oh no I want mine to be in the midst of everything and be the light” (parent). In speaking to the “bubble” of private education, the participant is referring to the protected, safe environment of an independent, Catholic school that does not afford, necessarily, the real-world difficulties or challenges that other schools may offer. She also mentions her desire for her children to serve as a light in the world, something that is echoed by others.

In providing context to the faith in both academic and real-world situations, independent, Catholic schools focus on creating teachable moments that seek to grow and develop the students in every possible way, under the umbrella of the Catholic faith, but also in such a way as to remain competitive against other independent schools. This is summarized in a parent’s interview response: “I think so often we hear that Catholic education is countercultural and what we are teaching goes against the grain and the moral fabric that is being woven into the society; however, I... there's a tension that exists within an independent Catholic education because we are very much

countercultural in our Catholicity but our independence also causes us to compete against independent schools and not parochial schools...So there is this need to also adapt to some of the progressions... you have to [take] a very modern approach to it.” This modern approach provides an opportunity for the school to remain competitive, provide developmentally appropriate, relevant theology curriculum, and prepare students morally for life outside the “bubble” of Catholic education.

Recognizing, Communicating, and Celebrating Identity

The third theme that arose from the data was this idea of recognizing, communicating, and celebrating in the identity of the school as both independent and Catholic. As one administrator explained, the challenge for independent schools is to maintain the prominence of Catholic identity at the forefront of overall school identity, as the pressure to compete with other schools may force Catholicism aside. This identity must be known by all community members and clearly outlined for faculty and staff, students, and parents. The process of developing that identity must “happen authentically and organically so that everyone feels comfortable and confident in who we are” (parent). This communal understanding and trust in the mission enhances the recognition, communication, celebration, and pride in a school’s identity.

Recognizing and establishing the identity can be a difficult, albeit necessary step. As one parent explained, “Once defined, the identity becomes clear and rooted in the Catholic faith and thus the Mission is created. It is through the mission lens that all areas should be seen.” As the foundational piece for the “mission lens,” the identity is of paramount importance. The establishment and articulation of a school identity influences all aspects of the school, especially when connected with intentionality. Fidelity to the

school identity was mentioned by multiple participants because “it’s important to be who you are” (parent). Such adherence to self, however, is only possible when the identity has been clearly articulated and accurately reflects the community because “identity is not a badge you put on and wear because you're in a school. It's who you are and who you become” (parent). When that identity is clear and accurate, the institution is better able to adhere to it and also communicate it to all who come into contact with the school, community, or graduates.

Communicating the identity, while occasionally referred to in the name of the school and printed materials, carried more emphasis when it was communicated through actions and not words, or, as one administrator stated, “Communicated not necessarily through the printed word but through the practice of the program.” This idea of living out the identity daily in actions and programming arose as a salient portion of the theme of identity. A high school administrator explained communicating the identity as significant provided that it is done as “an overt demonstration of something that is identifiably Catholic... in both little and big ways.” These overt demonstrations of the Faith assist in providing clarity and modeling of the identity and the attached expectations for a community rooted in such an identity. The independent, Catholic school must embrace being Catholic and portray that on a daily basis. While the written and spoken word certain assist in the communication of the school’s identity, communicating the identity through practice resonated much more largely with the interview participants.

A component of communicating the identity through practice is in celebrating the identity “because there is a level of quiet confidence that independent Catholic schools

should have. It shouldn't be this place where you're questioning are we doing the right thing... [instead] you're confident in the execution at all times, and I think that's what sets certain schools apart... the guideposts are not always moving. It's who we are. It's how we execute" (parent). As the Catholic identity provides the bedrock for the school, it sets the purpose for how the children are educated. Multiple participants cited this idea that "a Catholic school should be a Catholic school and not run from it" but rather fully embrace it in a way that demonstrates pride, confidence, and a welcoming environment.

Having a clear understanding of the school's identity enables everything from the onboarding of new faculty to the scheduling of programming to become more transparent and more fully mission-aligned. A strong identity that makes a school Catholic was described as "living our faith all day and talking a lot about what it means to be Catholic and making decisions through that lens" (administrator). This idea of using a Catholic lens was supported by another administrator who stated, "I think if you identify yourself as a Catholic then you're required to do certain things with your life and live a certain way." Both of these administrators speak to the same idea of using the Catholic faith as the basis or starting point for all decision-making. This clear sense of identity appeared to be closely related to the first theme of intentionality, as both speak to knowing who you are as a school and living that identity out in the daily life of the school. Living out the identity daily comes from having "our Catholic identity infused in everything we do all day long, not only in the curriculum but in our people that are on this campus day in and day out whether they're students or administrators or faculty or board members or our international students. I mean it's just kind of who we are" (administrator). This infusion

of Catholic identity stems from a clearly articulated, well-communicated, and often celebrated identity.

Leadership as the Embodiment of Faith and the School's Mission

Leadership emerged as a salient theme of Catholic identity within independent, Catholic schools because it is seen as imperative that school leadership serve as the example of faith and the school's mission. From hiring to modeling behavior, leadership must hold others accountable to acting in accordance with the school's foundational ideals, mission, and vision.

The phrase "starts at the top and trickles down" was used multiple times by participants in their describing the role of leadership in Catholic identity. One parent explained, "I think it's the conveying of the Catholic identity has to come from the very top, but everyone has to understand it. I feel like everyone has to understand exactly what we're doing and why we're doing it. And that's even the students right. I mean that that is ultimately why we're here. So the message can be conveyed by everyone. But who's the messenger? I think that comes from the person who is the shepherd of the school." In this response to the role of leadership, this parent is referring to the head of school, who is the "shepherd of the school." The head of school is frequently mentioned as the spiritual leader of the school and the person most responsible for communicating the identity and expectations to the community. While the head of school is ultimately responsible for all matters regarding identity and mission, it is also incumbent upon them to distribute the responsibility, to the extent possible, to all faculty and staff members to understand and support the mission of the school in order for the identity to be expressed clearly and through behavior and programming. Ultimately, the head of school and the

school leadership are seen as the stewards of the Catholic identity, as they are charged with modeling and communicating the identity on a daily basis.

The necessity of fully understanding the ramifications of decisions cannot be underscored, as the need for leadership to understand and rely upon the Catholic lens for all decisions was continuously mentioned. As one leadership team member explained, “I think that there is a responsibility for decision makers to understand that above all things we are a Catholic school.” This level of understanding and mission-awareness should inform all practices, from hiring to scheduling. Simply put, leadership is expected to hire people who are “prudent in making decisions, people that will stand up and say and do the right thing when the time comes” (administrator). Another administrator defined the ideal hire as “people of integrity.” The overall character of the applicant was often cited as a highly valuable qualification for any position within the school, from teaching to custodial. Similar to hiring, intentional scheduling with the Catholic lens in mind frequently arose as a best practice; for example, one administrator stated, “if leadership team understood that faith first and understands that that's where it starts and everything else trickles from there, then making those decisions as to what we're celebrating then it's going to be a no brainer.” This scheduling concern also supports the other theme of identity, specifically pride and ownership in being a Catholic school and not being afraid to celebrate Catholic traditions or to deny those that interfered with being a Catholic school.

In leading an independent, Catholic school, however, the head of school is also faced with additional challenges beyond identity, as “our independence also causes us to compete against independent schools and not parochial schools... So there is this need to

also adapt to some of the progressions” (parent). The school’s leader, then, must maintain the Catholic identity while also integrating innovation and other developments in education to stay current with the school’s direct competitors; thus, relying solely on tradition may leave the school unable to compete for resources and students, or worse, unable to serve its students meaningfully within the current educational and societal landscape. This is very much an opportunity, however, as being “an independent Catholic school is the best that you could be because you get the best of both worlds right. You get this anchor, you get this moral foundation you get this journey through your Catholic faith in whatever that looks like for you... And you get this way of being able to teach and be with children and help them through in a very progressive and in a bit of an innovative way too” (parent). If done well, leadership can marry both the innovation and latitude historically afforded to independent schools with the traditions, culture, and faith-based identity of a traditional Catholic school. Combining the moral anchor and the applied context for faith and learning with the innovation, creativity, and autonomy of independent schooling allows for the school to deliver its mission in the manner that is most effective for the student population because of its ability to be adaptive and reactive.

In addition to this visionary component of leadership, participants cited a number of characteristics and qualities desired in a school leader. Being present and visible, pastoral, child-centered, and exemplary in behavior and expectations for all emerged in multiple interviews, as did the idea that “leadership for Catholic identity...should be very well aware of what our faith teaches” (administrator). While no one particular quality or trait was repeated in every interview, all communicated a similar desire for leaders to

have “a level of understanding that you should just have as the leader of the school” (parent). Grounded in the Catholic faith and an authentic care and concern for each child, this understanding played itself out through a sometimes visionary, often pastoral, approach to leadership. One participant referred to the necessary leadership style as servant leadership, which another described as a sense of service to and for others (parent, administrator). Regardless of which label is ascribed to the style, the leader must also continually “keep trying to get better... [which is,] in itself, is a very Christian culture pursuit” (administrator). In working to meet all of these expectations and also bridge the duality of identity within an independent, Catholic school, the leader is tasked with a tremendous responsibility to live and lead authentically in alignment with the school’s mission, vision, and values.

That alignment comes in the understanding of “Catholic identity... [having] more to do with the role in which we can be like Christ... it’s having this foundational understanding of what it means to be a moral and just person” (administrator). Personal alignment with the school’s mission and vision translates to working on being more like Christ in actions and words. The “administrative role comes in of identifying exactly what is what pieces of the Catholic identity do we want to behold” and using that identity to ensure each decision is based on the pillars of the faith (parent). Using these pillars as guide posts, the school’s mission is delivered and the vision is achieved. Ultimately, leadership at an independent, Catholic schools seeks to carry out the mission with “lots of room for interpretation and innovation and creativity and wonderful things that should be happening in a school” (parent). As one head of school stated, “It falls on me as head of school to do my best to be a spiritual leader to be a model in that regard. Imperfect as that

model is. But a lot falls to us. To us, to the leadership team, to the faculty.” That responsibility of serving as the spiritual leader encompasses all qualities cited as requisite, such as being present, child-centered, and authentic, but also includes being a proper steward of mission-fidelity and accountability for all who work or participate in the larger school community.

Developing a Strong Community and Culture

Another prominent theme of having a strong and vibrant community that reflects the school’s unique culture serves to both welcome those that are new, of a different faith, or simply visiting. A significant component of the culture includes the school’s celebrations and traditions, including those specifically of the Catholic church. Many of the participants spoke to a visceral description of the culture where “you feel there’s a sense of all the kind of Beatitudes that Jesus talks about” (administrator). In a sense, when stepping on to the campus, one “feels like it’s a Catholic school” (administrator). In going deeper to describe how a community or culture can be established or maintained, participants spoke to a variety of more tangible items, such as iconography, relationships, an inclusive nature, and celebrating traditions together as a community.

To make the campus “feel like a Catholic school,” most participants explained the need for traditional iconography throughout the campus. Classrooms are affixed with crucifixes, hallways with illustrations and portraits of saints, and school oaths, mottos, or virtues affixed to banners. Having a chapel or focusing on the chapel in some way, either through Mass celebration or simply a greeting location, arose multiple times as another example of a physical manifestation of Catholic identity.

The culture was cited as visible in “the way we interact with each other when our parents interact with each other; the way our teachers interact with each other, where teachers interact with parents, and most of all... I think our students are respected or loved and cared for” (administrator). These interactions were viewed as indicative of the established rapport among community members, specifically teachers to students. One parent focused on how “faculty and staff exhibit and are role models within the school for what a Catholic school should look like and be.” Faculty and staff interactions with each other, students, and families were largely influential in establishing culture, as it is the hope to “surround these young people with healthy Catholic adults” (administrator). Also, an equally important relationship that was a focus of many of the parents was the trusted, common experience that their children experienced with others who attended school with them and continued their relationships even after graduation from said schools. From both a faculty to student and a student to student perspective, parents believed that “our culture here facilitates that nurturing and love of each other that then grows into that trust and that mutual respect” (parent). A community blessed with such a positive-focused culture aims to develop strong, authentic relationships. To achieve such a goal, an inclusive mindset must be established. As one administrator explained, inclusion was natural “because that's what our faith speaks to and there is no judgment on what their beliefs may or may not be. It's more you're part of the family part of our school community.” This inclusive nature permits the full participation of anyone involved with the school, which provides the desired “opportunity in a faith-based in a Catholic based environment [to] give them an opportunity to discover who they are and to grow in that faith” (administrator). At both the high school and elementary levels, administrators

spoke to desiring an inclusive, welcoming culture and community. Something that was echoed by parents who mentioned that all students, regardless of their faith, feel a part of the community.

One administrator spoke specifically to how an inclusive culture can be cultivated when she noted her “not being shy about talking about this aspect of school life with the faculty, staff, and students being or trying to be you know and being an authentic carrier of the faith by how you act, what you do; how you participate, what you say.” By clearly outlining expectations for all members of the community, she holds others accountable and models behavior and relationships for others through her interactions with all whom she encounters. Such inclusivity aligns with the Catholic faith, as “Catholic being universal I think we're very open to it whether it be other faiths or respectful to each child. I think that's huge” (parent). This idea of openness was especially prevalent at the grade school where an administrator remarked, “We're Catholic but we welcome you.” Furthermore, much concern and intentional programming was implemented to assist those younger students who are not Catholic but may be in a sacramental year, such as second grade when students participate in their First Holy Communion. For non-Catholic students, this can be an ostracizing event, which the school has worked hard to address. Celebrating the First Communion, however, is also a strength of the community and culture because it aligns so well with the celebrations and traditions of the Catholic church and traditional Catholic school. Honoring history and traditions of the Catholic church was a significant focus for the participants, both administrators and parents, because of the significance of traditions with the Catholic Church. In having the community celebrate special events, a concern did arise by one administrator who stated,

“Catholic traditions should be highlighted and not a watered down.” Highlighting Catholic traditions and holy days were considered an important driver of intentionally scheduling school events and programs. In the intentional celebrations and traditions by the community, it was noted that there existed a desire for “a celebration of Catholicism as opposed to a heavy handedness of Catholicism” (administrator). This marked a distinctive approach to traditions, where they are given due respect but also sought to be engaging and developmentally appropriate. Participants also mentioned desiring the opportunity to provide a clear description of the expectations for the different celebrations, such as the Mass, rosary, and day of adoration, so that all members understood exactly what they were doing and why. Because of the long history of Catholicism, there exists some comfort and consistency within its traditions (administrator). This was also thought to be true of educational models blessed with long-standing traditions.

Practitioners “steeped in tradition,” such as the Jesuits and Sacred Heart network schools, were held as model exemplars by many of the independent, Catholic school administrators. Charisms were also mentioned significantly and frequently, as something that would assist in cultivating a deeper Catholic identity but also as something not necessarily accessible to either school because of their lay, independent roots. While there existed a desire to have a charism, it was also stated that the schools did not have a founding order and were thus posed with the challenge of developing their own charism through the establishment of their identity.

Developing and celebrating a strong, unique culture within a caring, inclusive, supporting community enables schools to develop fully and implement their Catholic

identity through the actual practice of welcoming all families, students, and faculty into the school community. Through iconography, relationships, inclusivity, and celebrations, schools are able to create a culture that embodies their Catholic identity.

Facilitating an Engaging Spiritual Journey for all Community Members

Student engagement in faith activities that are developmentally appropriate are critical to establishing and nurturing a true love of God through a caring, loving environment that supports the spiritual journey of all community members, including students, parents, and faculty. As one administrator explained, “We want to be strong academically but we absolutely are here to grow kids in their spirituality whether they come in the door as a kid who's been going to CCD their whole life and mass every Sunday or they come in the door as an international student says what, tell me about Christianity.” Opening the doors to a developmentally-appropriate faith journey was mentioned by all participants as a crucial component to establishing a school’s Catholic identity. As one Head of School stated, we wish for our graduates “to be open to God’s call and aware of God’s presence in their lives.” An independent, Catholic school seeks to foster an environment that supports an engaging spiritual journey for not just students but all members of the community.

Instilling a love of Christ was mentioned throughout multiple interviews as a desire of a Catholic school. In providing different opportunities, whether it was prayer, Mass, retreats, or service, both administrators and parents sought to create safe, challenging situations for students to be tested in applying their faith and growing more confident in it. Through meaningful integration of their faith, students are able to “live lives that reflect the Catholic values that they've heard about and felt” (administrator).

This can be a challenging to do so in a developmentally-appropriate manner, but it is imperative that it is done so to help increase student engagement. As one parent notes, “We have respect for... [the school] to recognize[e the middle school] age to be kind of that crazy age [but] you meet them where they are and you respect them where they are knowing that they're all over the place and that it's not always easy and they're not always going to make good choices but this is a safe place to make the mistakes.” Possessing a developmentally-responsive curriculum and pedagogy allows for the creation of a safe place where students are encouraged to fail forward and use their mistakes as teachable moments for future progress. In meeting the middle school students where they are developmentally, it was also noted that what “religion classes look like in middle school and then what they look like in high school are very different” (administrator). This was noted as an area of concern, as there existed a desire to reengage the high schoolers in theology in an academic setting. At the high school level, however, retreats for students to engage in meaningful service and find their passions provide opportunities to express faith through more actions. These intentional retreats are designed to move each person forward on both faith and academics. As one administrator described it, the retreats and the entire theology program is an “opportunity to discover who they are and to grow in that faith” (administrator).

The spiritual education and moral development for students and leaders helps to build future faith leaders through formal and informal engagement of their faith. Whether through traditional religion curriculum or through service-learning, students are provided with a context to the faith in a meaningful, highly-engaging, developmentally

appropriate manner. Doing so in such an intentional manner provides the school with the ability to help nurture and grow the faith lives of their students.

Conclusion

Throughout the coding process and data analysis, the emergence of six salient themes spoke to how independent Catholic schools can establish, strengthen, and rely on their Catholic identity as they adapt to the current educational environment. Exercising intentionality and providing context to both faith and learning emerged as clear themes. Specifically, being intentional and strategic in planning so that the lens of the Catholic faith is applied to all communications, events, and actions, including onboarding of new families, teachers, and students to the school community. Likewise, providing context to the faith in both an educational and real-world application allows independent, Catholic schools to engage students in authentic learning based on the foundation of the Catholic faith.

Additionally, the theme of recognizing, celebrating, communicating, and taking pride in the identity of the school as both independent and Catholic arose as a significant component in ensuring a strong Catholic identity for the school. Beyond simply having the word “Catholic” in one’s name, a school must be clear in its identity and ensure that the identity is known among all members of the community, which begins with leadership. As culture and identity start at the top, it is imperative that school leadership serve as the example of faith and the school’s mission. From hiring to role-modeling, leadership must hold others accountable to acting in accordance with the school’s foundational ideals, mission, and vision.

The final two themes center around the experience of participating in such a school. The centering of the community and culture of a school around the School's Catholic values was shown to be significant in developing the Catholic identity. Ideally, it was desired to have a strong, vibrant community that reflects the school's unique culture that serves to both welcome those that are new, of a different faith, or simply visiting. A significant component of the culture includes the school's celebrations and traditions. In addition to the strong community and culture, providing all community members with an engaging spiritual journey was viewed as critical to promoting a strong Catholic identity. A caring, loving environment that supports the spiritual journey of all community members and student engagement in faith activities that are developmentally appropriate are critical to establishing and nurturing a true love of Catholicism.

Through a combination of actions and strategies as outlined by the themes, independent, Catholic schools are able to adapt to changing times and still retain their Catholic identity (see Figure 1). Intentional and strategic planning involves running all aspects of the school through the lens of the school's mission. Within school leadership rests the responsibility of ensuring that all aspects are aligned with the mission and vision. Furthermore, a strong and vibrant community centered around a faith-filled culture that truly embodies elements the Catholic faith lends itself to a school that celebrates and promotes its rich identity as an independent, Catholic school, which ultimately allows all community members to participate in an appropriate spiritual journey that differentiates to each person's developmental and spiritual readiness.

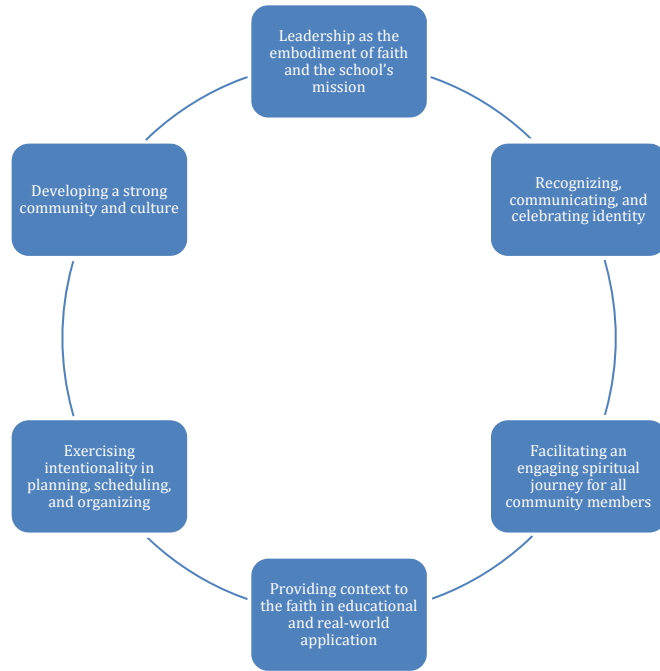


Figure 1. A Grounded Theory Model of How Schools Retain Catholic Identity.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, grounded theory dissertation in practice study is to describe how independent Catholic schools adapt to changing times while still retaining their identity for independent Catholic schools in the Diocese of Austin, Texas. This chapter includes a discussion of the findings and their relation to literature regarding Catholic schools and Catholic identity. This chapter concludes with a discussion of limitations of this study, directions for further research, and a brief summary.

This chapter contains discussion and future research directions to help answer the research question: As independent Catholic schools emerge as a viable model for Catholic education, how do they establish and maintain their Catholic identity?

Conclusions

From the emergence of the six themes, the research suggests a number of implications for best practices in how independent, Catholic schools can adapt to the current educational climate while maintaining their Catholic identity. Clear implications arose from the research: (a) leadership is critical to all areas, (b) the importance of providing a proper orientation to all community members, (c) the school's identity must be articulated and communicated, (d) all programs and planning must be aligned with the mission and facilitate a context for learning, and (e) opportunities for community celebrations and traditions should be created.

Leadership is Critical to All Areas

The leader of the school, often referred to specifically as the Head of School, was seen as an invaluable component to establishing and maintaining that Catholic identity.

The scope of such a position entails being ultimately responsible for all aspects of the school, including everything from academic programming to facility maintenance. The leader of a school was commonly mentioned as the individual charged with establishing the tone of Catholic identity and serving as a model for all things faith-related. In practice, this implies that the Head of School should be one who openly celebrates their faith and shares that personal celebration with the school community.

Additionally, continued research on the role of the Board in governing an independent, Catholic school can be beneficial to establishing ways in which the Board can offer critical leadership in Catholic identity. Specifically, focusing on the collaboration between the Board and school leadership can allow for continued growth in recognizing how best to employ strategies to develop Catholic identity.

Providing a Proper Orientation to All Community Members

Onboarding emerged as an area of significance for a number of different participants. From new faculty to new families, orienting those new to the community to the school's identity, purpose, and vision was seen as being of critical importance. Teacher preparation through professional development, specifically in regard to teaching in a Catholic school, is a necessary element of ensuring consistency in messaging of Catholic virtues and teachings.

Articulating and Communicating the School's Identity

The establishment of a Catholic identity is closely related to the identity of the school, especially within an independent, Catholic school. In navigating the dichotomy of being an independent school and also a Catholic school, it is important for the school

to articulate what the means and how that informs daily and long-range practice and planning.

The clarity of identity evolves through the development of such items as the portrait of a graduate and in strategic planning. This developed and clear identity provides a strong sense of pride among its stakeholders which allows for transparency in marketing, enrollment management, and finances.

Mission Alignment and Programmatic Context

By aligning programming with the mission, the school is able to provide a rationale for school undertakings and also provide a context for a true application of faith to one's life. The alignment of programs, systems, and messaging with the school mission allows for all actions to be singularly united in a common direction. Mission-alignment facilitates a decision-making process that ensures the presence of a strong Catholic identity even as the school evolves. For example, when discussing the addition of a new extracurricular program, asking if that program furthers the mission of providing a Catholic environment allows for the acceptance of a program only if it furthers the mission and thus, the Catholic identity.

The second element of mission alignment is ensuring that programmatic context occurs through the real-world application of faith and learning, where students can see how the Catholic faith informs their daily actions and decision-making. To truly facilitate a faith-alive program, the school must seek to illustrate how faith-driven behavior can be done authentically, so as to deliver the message of the Catholic Church clearly.

Celebrating Community and Traditions

A critical element of any school community are the specific, unique traditions and community elements. Independent, Catholic schools are encouraged to develop their own traditions that are mission-aligned, but such schools also have the ability to celebrate uniquely Catholic traditions, such as the Mass, rosary, and the liturgical calendar. By scheduling community celebrations in accordance with the liturgical calendar, the school is able to create opportunities for community time while also supporting the school as a Catholic institution.

Proposed Solutions

While no perfect plan will fit every school because of the unique nature of all campuses, the following proposed plan may be used to help guide the development of a campus-specific plan that allows for the facilitation of a strong Catholic identity through three, core areas: Leadership, intentionality, and onboarding (see Figure 2).

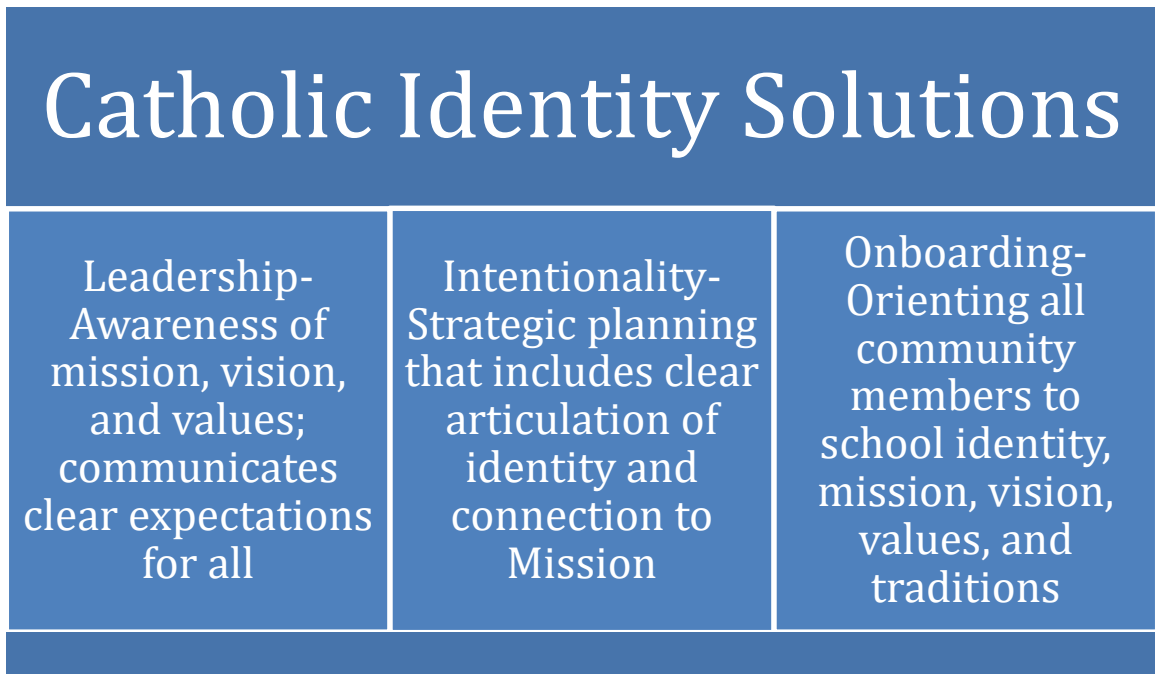


Figure 2. Catholic Identity Solutions.

Leadership continually arose as a critical element of establishing, maintaining, and communicating Catholic identity within an independent, Catholic school. Strong leadership must be understanding of and devoted to the Catholic identity of the school. The Board and the Head of School must collaborate on strategic planning and articulation of the school's identity in order to articulate clearly the mission, vision, and values, while also working to outline clearly expectations for all. Because of the significance of such leadership, the importance of a strong Board orientation and ongoing Board formation with a focus on the mission and values of the Church and on Catholic identity cannot be understated. Through strategic hiring, outlining of clear expectations, and holding employees accountable to furthering the mission of the school, leadership can work to empower all employees to celebrate the school's Catholic identity while also providing a model for all students and parents to follow. The articulation of the school's identity must be done in a thoughtful, intentional manner, so that the school's mission, vision, and values are fully aligned and complimentary.

Exercising intentionality in all planning, communication, and execution is crucial. For each program, event, or initiative, the school must ask itself if the intended task is aligned with the school's mission, vision, and values. Recognizing that everything done by the school must be mission-focused and approached through the lens of the school's identity and vision is critical the establishment and clear articulation of the school's identity.

This articulation of identity can be done through a variety of manners but must also be imbued throughout all marketing and admissions materials, as the identity of the school is unchanging and clear. Whether through the portrait of a graduate, strategic

plan, or annual fund materials, the identity of school must transcend each piece as a unified presentation. Additionally, articulation of the school mission, vision, and values can include how each applies to the daily life of the school, so that clear articulation can inform both hiring and student recruitment.

Intensive onboarding experience should be organized for all members of the community. New employees should be oriented to the significance and history of Catholic education, both nationally and specific to their school, and how that history affects the daily operations of the specific school. Beyond the historical significance, employees should be oriented to the significance of faith in the life of the school, especially as it relates to their role of serving as a witness to the faith in their daily comportment and interactions with others. For many, basic tenets of the Catholic faith, including community-specific traditions and the order of the Mass, should also be included, as employees, Catholic or otherwise, would benefit from having a clear understanding of the not only how a particular celebration will operate but also why that celebration is occurring. Each celebration, whether all school Mass, saying the Rosary, or something else entirely, is a teachable moment for the students and should be approached as such.

Onboarding the parents and students can take a variety of forms, but through each process it is important for each group to leave with a clear understanding of the school's Catholic identity and how that identity infuses all that the school does. From these orientations, students and parents should understand the expectations for their own roles. Additional literature to support the information supplied in the orientations would also be highly beneficial.

In seeking to communicate its Catholic identity, a school must develop a nurturing faith environment that encourages all members to grow in their faith life. Evaluation of programmatic effectiveness, then, is a challenging area for Catholic identity because faith is unique to each person. Through focus groups, annual surveys, and student interviews, a school can assess how well the Catholic identity is being communicated or perceived.

Implementation for the Solution

Focusing on the three areas of leadership, intentionality, and onboarding, while potentially challenging, can be done through a variety of means. A strategic partnership between the board and head of school can ensure that the leadership of the school is mission-aligned and empowers the head of school to direct all aspects of the school to be aligned, as well. Both the board and the head must articulate the mission, vision, and values of the school and hold others accountable. Truly, leadership must demonstrate daily ownership of the mission, vision, and values by setting the standard for all employees.

Exercising intentionality through strategic planning that ensures all programming and decisions are mission-aligned can be done through deliberative discussion regarding school policy and focus. While the school leader must embody the mission and also exhort all community members to refer to the mission time and again, all school leadership must be trained in relying on the mission and Catholic foundation to base their decision-making process. Through the participation in strategic planning sessions together, receiving focused and honest evaluations, and collaborating on the establishment of meeting norms, senior school leadership can work with the head of

school to ensure that intentionality of mission-alignment plays a significant role in all decisions in all areas.

Finally, onboarding employees, students, and parents to the community will look different for each group, but the essential approach of initial training and explanation followed by continued orienting and guidance is necessary. For employees, information regarding school practices and traditions, as well as larger elements of Catholic education and its history, are necessary before the school year even begins. Continued training throughout the year provides them with an opportunity to learn the school's culture through seeing it in context on a daily basis. For students and parents, the approach can be similar, in that they can participate in orientation at the beginning of the school year, but continued education and orientation will certainly look different, as the students will experience it through the classroom which necessitates a robust parent outreach program that allows for continued education and orientation to the school and its culture.

O'Connell (2012) states that mission and Catholic identity must remain at the forefront of all Catholic schools. Through strong leadership, intentionality in decision-making, and robust orientations, schools can clearly articulate the mission and how it is lived out by community members on a daily basis. As lay leadership appears likely moving forward within Catholic education, schools that seek to develop and maintain strong Catholic identity must work to integrate these approaches.

Implications for Leadership Theory and Practice

Leaders, then, of independent, Catholic schools must recognize the foundational aspects of Catholicism that must imbue all elements of the school. As one interviewee mentioned, "the lens of the Catholic faith" must be used intentionally in guiding all

discussions and decisions. A common refrain among those interviewed mentioned that Catholic identity “starts at the top,” which illustrates the significant role of the school leader as the spiritual leader of the school. In both actions and words, the leader must be cognizant not only of the role of spiritual leader but of its significance in how it affects the community, culture, and experiences of all members of the community.

In order to ensure that this lens is employed in guiding all school processes, the leader holds the responsibility of hiring people of integrity who are mission-aligned and can further promote the school’s mission on a daily basis. The process cannot end simply at hiring, however, as the leader must ensure that there is a substantial onboarding process in order to orient all new employees to the mission and vision of the school, specifically focusing on the Catholic foundation and the role of faith within the school life.

Beyond the orientation, being mindful of the spiritual journey of all faculty and staff members and supporting such a journey through ensuring sustained time for spiritual development. The leader must honor the sacredness of both the liturgical and communal traditions that contribute so significantly to a fostering a vibrant culture and community. While the liturgical celebrations are largely outlined by the Church and offer wonderful experiences in tradition and spirituality, the community may also have unique, positive traditions which should be honored and preserved in order to continue cultivation of the sense of community and belonging.

Ultimately, the responsibility falls to the leader for ensuring that the faith is highlighted as an element of the school and offered as a true value addition for all community members, whether student, parent, or employee. In serving as the leader of

an independent, Catholic school, one is tasked with fulfilling the dual role of being both the faith leader and organizational manager.

Limitations

As with any study, delimitations are inherent to the work. For example, applications for this research may exist only to independent Catholic schools within a particular Diocese, as each holds its own superintendent and diocesan office, as well as geographically-dictated conditions, such as family demographics, public and private school competition, and socioeconomic status. As the study focuses on independent Catholic schools, the information is not applicable to all independent schools, as independent schools are not necessarily Catholic. This study is driven by the current time and situation facing Catholic schools, so this information may not be applicable in future years as technology progresses and variables within education progress.

Within this particular study, certain research limitations also exist. As this study will occur in a particular period of time, current social and economic factors will influence some of the responses from the participants. With legislation for school choice currently pending, the nature of Catholic school enrollment may very well be significantly altered in the future. Additionally, the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews may be influenced by the interviewer, so the interviews will be structured to build rapport with the participant in order to minimize the influence of the interviewer.

Sampling Limitations

In using theoretical sampling to identify and solicit participant, limitations of participants arose. Early saturation also prevented the opportunity to explore more diverse viewpoints. In using a sample of administrators and parents, there existed no full-

time teachers and no students. All but two participants were currently or at some point had had their own children in a Catholic school. Many participants have filled multiple roles, as five participants were administrators who also taught. Seven of the participants are former full-time teachers. Adding students or more faculty members could have broadened perspectives shared; such additions may also have provided more specific experiences or strategies employed through pedagogy to convey Catholic identity.

Limitations of the Researcher

Personal bias of the researcher was sought to be avoided to the maximum extent possible. The researcher's personal knowledge of the schools posed ethical considerations, as the relationship of the researcher to the school may have influenced how some information was provided or viewed. Through axial coding and vetted interview questions, the researcher sought to avoid personal bias in the reporting of the data. Personal bias may also have arisen through the questioning or follow-up questioning during the actual interview, so the vetted questions also included potential follow-up questions. Additionally, member checking was used to validate further the analyses developed from the collected data.

Prolonged time in the field by the researcher also helps to increase the research's validation, as the researcher's experience as a parent, teacher, and administrator lent immediate credibility to participants in interviews and encouraged a depth and honesty that may not have existed with an unknown interviewer; conversely, such experience may have brought an internal bias to the information gathered.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future quantitative research on this topic may lend additional credibility to this study. A quantitative analysis of survey data from student, parent, and teacher populations may provide strengthen the themes that emerged from this study or lead to new trends.

Looking at independent, Catholic schools on a national level may also yield considerably new information, as this information is only applicable to schools in the Austin area. Community and cultural differences may place different levels of significance on the themes generated. Through a grounded theory approach, the school leaders may be interviewed to generate themes applicable on a national level to provide a higher level of generalizability.

With respect to the significance of leadership and exercising intentionality throughout all aspects of the school, further research on effective leadership traits may allow for an enhancement of the leadership theme. Additionally, further qualitative research on board-head of school relations and senior school leadership alignment, as well as board orientation and development, may provide more practical applications of how independent, Catholic schools can adapt and integrate industry best practices.

The significance of community appeared frequently throughout the interviews and warrants continued research focus. Community and culture, however, are difficult to rate or ascribe a value to, so undertaking a qualitative approach would provide an opportunity for the participants to describe how their community is formed, sustained, strengthened, and celebrated. Understanding all those aspects of community in a school can help

inform leadership decisions, community and culture targeted initiatives, and overall school emphasis on community.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest the following as crucial to establishing, retaining, and developing Catholic identity within independent, Catholic schools as they adapt to the changing environment of education: (a) strong leadership in all areas of the school, (b) providing a proper orientation to all community members, (c) articulating and communicating the school's identity, (d) mission alignment and programmatic context, and (e) celebrating community and traditions. Taken in isolation, each of these recommendations can be an area of a focus for school throughout an entire school year. The challenge of integrating all five smoothly falls to the school leadership working in concert with each member of the community.

Adapting to the ever-changing environmental landscape is a challenge for all schools. With new initiatives and calls for accountability a common occurrence, creating intentional independent, Catholic education that is sustainable, viable, and true to its Catholic roots is no small challenge. This study, however, suggests that focusing on intentional alignment with mission and vision through a strong leadership dedicated to the school's identity can create such a school. These characteristics, coupled with a strong, vibrant community and culture, fosters an environment of inclusion and growth for all. While each school is unique and supports a specific culture, recognizing that culture and its identity allows all members of an independent, Catholic school community to celebrate the school and create a learning environment that provides real-world context

for both faith and learning so the whole child is nurtured and students are developed to be people of integrity.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol: How efficient are different models of Catholic education in communicating their Catholic identity?

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for this research project on the efficacy of communicating Catholic identity by the different models of Catholic education. You have been selected because of your position as a Catholic school leader and thus someone with a great deal of information to share about your specific school conveys its Catholic identity and message to its constituents. The purpose of this study is not to evaluate you, your methods, or your school; instead, it seeks simply improve understanding of how different models of Catholic education can convey effectively Catholic identity. I want to remind you that your comments will remain confidential and anonymous. I would like to tape record this interview only as a means of facilitating my note-taking. Before we begin, I ask that you sign our consent form (provide form). Please also know that you may take a break at any time and may ask any questions for clarification throughout the interview.

Questions

Interviewee background:

1. What is your current role in your school?
2. How long have you been in your current position (teachers/administrators only)?
3. How you long have you worked at/had children attend this institution?
4. Have you ever been associated with another Catholic school?
5. Have you filled other roles within a school setting before?

Institutional background:

6. Describe your particular school's model: Parochial, independent, private, religiously-sponsored, Diocesan, regional, etc.
7. In your opinion, what makes your school Catholic?

Catholic identity:

8. Explain your perception of the purpose of Catholic education.
9. Explain your perception of Catholic identity, as it relates to Catholic education.
10. How does your school convey its Catholic identity to parents? Students? Faculty/staff? Stakeholders?
11. How would you rate the effectiveness of your school in providing a Catholic educational experience to its students?
12. What could be improved within your school in order to provide a more significant Catholic educational experience?
13. In your experience, are particular schools that excel in conveying Catholic identity? If so, what made them successful?
14. In your experience, are particular schools not able to convey their Catholic identity to their constituents?
15. Where does the responsibility for conveying Catholic identity rest within a Catholic school?
16. If there is something more you'd like to add about Catholic identity within Catholic education that I have not asked please describe that for me.

Additional questions for depth and breadth to the above questions:

Would you expound on that?

Tell me more.

How would you describe that in a different way?

I would like to hear more about that.

Would you clarify that for me?

Field Notes

Length of interview:

Responses	Reflective Notes

Appendix B**Institutional Review Board**

2500 California Plaza • Omaha, Nebraska 68178
 phone: 402.280.2126 • fax: 402.280.4786 • email:
 irb@creighton.edu

DATE: July 12, 2017

TO: James Melone
 FROM: Creighton University IRB-02 Social Behavioral

PROJECT TITLE: [1037391-1] Nurturing Catholic Identity in Two Independent Catholic Schools
 SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
 DECISION DATE: July 12, 2017

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # 2/3

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The following items were reviewed in this submission:

- Application Form - 114.1B Application for Determination of Exempt Status Surveys-interview-observation.doc (UPDATED: 05/30/2017)
- Creighton - IRB Application Form - Creighton - IRB Application Form (UPDATED: 04/26/2017)
- Letter - Email to the participants.docx (UPDATED: 05/30/2017)
- Letter - Participant Information Letter_052917.docx (UPDATED: 05/30/2017)
- Other - Letter of Agreement_SMCA Site.docx (UPDATED: 05/30/2017)
- Other - Letter of Agreement_SGCS site.docx (UPDATED: 05/30/2017)
- Proposal - DIP Proposal_071117.docx (UPDATED: 07/11/2017)
- Questionnaire/Survey - Survey tools_Interview Protocol_052917.docx (UPDATED: 05/30/2017)

This project has been determined to be exempt from Federal Policy for Protection of Human Subjects as per 45CFR46.101 (b) 2/3.

All protocol amendments and changes are to be submitted to the IRB and may not be implemented until approved by the IRB. Please use the modification form when submitting changes.

If you have any questions, please contact Christine Scheuring at 402-280-3364 or christinescheuring@creighton.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Creighton University IRB-02 Social Behavioral's records.