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Responses

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THE CATHOLIC PERSPECTIVE: A RESPONSE TO LOURDES SHEEHAN

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My response is from the perspective of the Catholic school community, which operates about one-third of the private schools in this country and educates over half of the students currently in private schools (McLaughlin & Broughman, 1997). This student enrollment figure represents a decline of about 25% of the students since the Second Vatican Council, although there have been enrollment increases in the last few years (Walch, 1997). On the other hand, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of conservative Christian schools and in the percentage of unaffiliated religious schools since the late 1960s. Unfortunately, with the exception of some uneven historical research and Peshkin's (1986) brilliant case study, we have scant qualitative or quantitative data on these schools.

Sister Lourdes first examined the lack of ethnic diversity in private schools. One of the most worrisome issues to the Catholic Church is the loss of the Hispanic population (Dolan & Deck, 1994)—over one million members in the past 15 years (Greeley, 1997)—and an issue that is reflected in the number of Hispanic youth enrolled in the Catholic schools. The concern is not a politically correct one, but rather one of pastoral care for people who have been traditionally Catholic. This is a research topic which will not gain much insight from survey research, but one that desperately needs data regarding effective ways for meeting the spiritual needs of Hispanic families, including the schooling of the young.

The financial situation of nonprofit private schools is another serious issue and one that appears unjust and un-American: there is no research evidence that government or public financial support for the schools will come, or indeed is a best solution to our financial needs. On the other hand, Catholic education ought to be available to all Catholic youth who desire it. Perhaps Erickson's (1979) research into the Canadian schools conducted before the advent of federal aid which gave these schools help has not been as thoroughly and thoughtfully analyzed as it should have been, and perhaps this research has something to say to our current decision making.

A word about low salaries and teacher turnover: In 1986, one of my students, Radecki (1987), did a doctoral study on this subject and based his research on the theoretical framework of Herzberg (1966). Since then several studies have confirmed his findings, that the principal reason for the heavy turnover in the Catholic school community was not low salaries but rather the absence of the opportunity for advancement, which is consistent with Herzberg's theory. Radecki's research was conducted over 10 years ago, but with our very thin administrative structures mentioned so frequently by Bryk and his colleagues (Bryk & Holland, 1984; Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993), the results of a similar study done today would likely be the same. Of course the question "Why did you leave the Catholic schools?" is a different question from "Are you satisfied with your salary?"

Curriculum is another issue warranting concern. One notable area of weakness in Catholic schools has been the inability of administrators and teachers to design curriculum and the lack of time available for it. The schools have relied on courses of studies from the diocesan offices, documents which have all but disappeared today together with the vision of *Guiding Growth in Christian Social Living* (Smith & McGreal, 1952). I observe teachers using brief topical outlines, and even the table of contents from their textbooks, and, to a lesser degree, publishers' suggestions regarding computer software.

Last year Heltsley (1996), superintendent of the Diocese of Monterey, surveyed the use of computer games in Catholic elementary schools. She also did a content analysis of the Roman documents to ascertain what family values the Church seemed to indicate were the most important. She then did an analysis to determine the extent to which the curricular games supported or contradicted the five most important values. We should not be surprised that there were contradictions, but it was extremely disappointing to discover how dramatically the games undermined the values. The educational community already has massive research evidence on the power of the "hidden curriculum." But how are Catholic school administrators using the research?

The area of curriculum and curriculum design is related to the issue of leadership, that of teachers, principals, and superintendents. The doctoral programs of the Catholic colleges and universities which are members of the Association of Catholic Leadership Programs (ACLP) have been conducting some good research on the leadership of principals, and the results of that research have had an influence on the course content of the leadership programs, namely in the areas of spirituality, faith development, Catholic school identity, Catholic school research, and effective schools. There are, however, very few studies on the role of the Catholic school superintendent.

Now to the research agenda with which Sister Lourdes concludes her paper.

The relationship between Internet access and student achievement is a particularly stimulating one. It is an excellent issue for all schools, not just private schools, and the question of inappropriate or excessive use of technology is one being raised by some very thoughtful voices in the Catholic community today.

Questions around leadership and curriculum actually go to the heart of the issue of Catholic identity which Sister Lourdes singled out as a critical issue. Catholic identity includes, but is not merely a matter of, committed service, religious symbols, or theology classes; it also embraces a climate and culture nurtured by competent leadership and flowing from a carefully designed curriculum.

In addition to including leadership and curriculum in the matter of Catholic identity, and career advancement in the study of turnover, another dimension needs to be added to the financial question: What can we do to help the Catholic Church community understand that the Catholic school system is one of evangelization, and that as a pastoral instrument it needs the financial support of the entire community, and not just the parents of children in the schools?

In addition to the research agenda, Sister's global and difficult research questions call for additional types of methodologies to augment and thicken the data gathered from surveys.

I would like to propose that professors who direct dissertation research of Catholic schools get together to design a large study of the role and practices of the superintendency of Catholic schools, for example, although the design could be one of many large issues. The study would contain too many variables and their appropriate methodologies for an individual doctoral student to complete given the usual restrictions of time, purpose, and money.

Our first task would be to divide the design into several parts and recruit one or more of our doctoral students to do each of the parts according to interest and inclination. The students might be connected by a Web site and have access to a common body of data which would be supplemented as the students progress with their investigations. The mentors could also communicate through the Web. The result would be a number of dissertations which when brought together by the mentors would form a single focused study. The result would also be a witness to cooperation and sharing among Catholic universities, especially within and among their Catholic school departments.

Such a complex plan could succeed. Let us hope that Tropman (1995) is correct in maintaining that sharing is one of the "core elements of the Catholic ethic" and that it "is part of a natural and expected exchange." He writes that "to share is as central to the Catholic ethic as achievement and work are to the Protestant ethic" (p. 8).

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