

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

RESEARCH ON CATHOLIC EDUCATION: A VIEW FROM AUSTRALIA

JOSEPH M. O'KEEFE, S.J.

Boston College

The Review of Research for this issue is devoted to reflections about Catholic school research in Australia. Based on a survey of literature and conversations with educators during my recent Visiting Fellowship in the Educational Leadership Program of the Australian Catholic University, this article explores several key domains of research that would be of special interest to Catholic school researchers in other parts of the world. It is hoped that this article will be followed by additional contributions in order to continue a fruitful scholarly dialogue for American, Canadian, Australian, and British colleagues as well as those from other nations.

To set a context for the reader, the article begins with a comparison of Catholic educational institutions in Australia and the United States. Next, it offers an overview of research on Australian Catholic schools. Then it discusses three issues in Australia that are of particular interest: uniform national data collection, determination of the socioeconomic status of students, and questions of Catholic identity. Finally, it offers some reflections on the importance of international collaborative research.

A COMPARISON OF CATHOLIC EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN AUSTRALIA AND THE UNITED STATES

A comparison of Catholic educational institutions in Australia and the United States reveals both differences and similarities. As indicated in Table 1, the greatest difference is in size of the population; the U.S. population is 14 times that of Australia. Catholic institutions—dioceses, numbers of students, and educational institutions—reflect that difference. Though smaller size brings

to Australia the advantage of more national cohesion, limits of personnel and financial resources can restrict research productivity. A second difference also restricts research productivity: the absence of a Catholic research-based higher education sector in Australia until the beginning of this decade. Today two institutions—the Australian Catholic University with its multiple campuses on the east coast and Notre Dame University on the west—offer new possibilities. Third, while the number of students receiving an Australian Catholic education is smaller, the scope is greater; nearly one fifth of all Australian school-aged children are in Catholic institutions. A fourth important difference is in the domain of funding. The significance of the Catholic school sector and a more benevolent notion of church-state relations explain the success of the Catholic community in 1973 obtaining near total funding of schools by the government. It is reported that the bishops informed political leaders that without funding help they would have to close all of their schools, leaving a half-million students at the doorstep of state schools and provoking a national educational crisis. Australian Catholic schools charge little or no tuition, offer salaries comparable to those in state schools, and have adequate supplies and modern physical plants. In contrast, U.S. Catholic leaders need to devote enormous amounts of time and energy to mere survival; at best, they must develop funding streams other than tuition (usually 80% or more of operating income) through annual fundraising efforts, capital campaigns, deferred giving programs, grants, and special events (Cimino, Haney, & O’Keefe, in press).

Table 1: Catholic Educational Institutions in Australia and the USA

	Australia	USA
Total population	18.5 million	260 million
Catholic population	4.6 million (24.9%)	60 million (23.1%)
Dioceses	28	175
Schools	1,699	8,233
% of Catholic schools worldwide	3%	14%
Elementary/secondary students	602,931	2,648,859
% of Catholic students worldwide	1.4%	6.6%
% of students in country	19%	5%
% of Catholic students in Catholic schools	40% (est.)	25% (est.)
Teachers	35,806	152,260
% lay	97%	93%
% female	70%	81%
Higher ed. institutions	2	235
Higher ed. students	15,000 (est.)	611,198
Seminaries	16	218
Seminarians	276	5,083

Sources: Dixon, 1996; *Official Catholic Directory*, 1996; Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 1997; Metzler, 1998; Ryan, 1988.

Catholic educational institutions in the two countries are similar in many ways. First, Catholic educational institutions have become a ministry of laity. Only in U.S. urban elementary schools are women religious present in significant numbers (O'Keefe & Murphy, in press), and that number will decrease rapidly. Second, schools in both countries are part of a minority church in a society once dominated by a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority. Today they exist in first-world, highly individualistic, secular, affluent, and consumeristic societies that are often antithetical to religious interests. In recent history, American and Australian Catholics have experienced remarkable upward mobility and assimilation to dominant morés. Third, they both belong to a Church that transcends national boundaries and European culture, with similar issues of membership, authority and polity, theological debates, and liturgical practices.

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ON AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

As in the United States, research on Australian Catholic schools is conducted by full-time university-based researchers, doctoral students, administrator-researchers, and government. A recent annotated bibliography (McLaughlin, Spry, Kelty, & Sultmann, 1998) is one attempt to put together a listing of published material, much of it research-based, that helps Australian Catholics think about their schools. Among other resources are the ERIC database, UMI dissertations, and two Catholic periodicals: *The Australasian Catholic Record* and *Catholic School Studies*. In the 1990s, a number of books have been produced by Australian and international publishers, as well as the Australian Catholic University and various Catholic education commissions. The topics are varied: arts education, child protection, education reform, funding, gender equity, historical studies, leadership studies, literacy, pastoral care, professional development, school culture, racism, religious education and catechetics, and teacher supply and demand. The Worldwide Web has made many of these publications accessible to a wider audience in the U.S. and elsewhere. Unfortunately, a thorough, critical overview of research on Australian Catholic schools, along the lines of Convey's (1992) publication, has yet to appear.

Much of the scholarship devoted to Catholic schools is conducted by full-time university-based historians, theologians, and social scientists. As in the United States, the social scientists employ a range of methodologies: attitudinal surveys, qualitative analyses, and case studies. In contrast to the United States, a large number of recent studies are theoretical, not empirical. This is especially true of publications about Catholic identity.

For many years doctoral students have completed dissertations about Australian Catholic schools in secular Australian universities, in secular and

Catholic U.S. universities, and in Britain. As the Australian Catholic University becomes a center for doctoral research about Catholic schools, it would be helpful to create a parallel to Hunt's (1998) study of doctoral dissertations about Catholic schools in the U.S.

Each of the 28 dioceses in Australia has a Catholic Education Office with a director and staff members. Research varies according to the size and capabilities of the diocese. In each of the six states (New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Victoria, Western Australia, Tasmania) and two territories (Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory) a Catholic Education Commission oversees policy and stimulates research and development. In Canberra, the National Catholic Educational Commission does the same for the whole country.

Government is an important source of research about Catholic schools. In the United States, the National Center for Educational Statistics in the federal Department of Education has provided invaluable data for Catholic school researchers in the High School and Beyond Study, the National Educational Longitudinal Study, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the School and Staffing Survey, and the Private School Universe Survey. Other governmental agencies collect data on a regular basis, though the standards and criteria differ quite significantly from state to state and from city to city.

The federal government of Australia, commonly referred to as the commonwealth, engages in extensive data collection and analysis. The Department of Employment, Education, Training, and Youth Affairs (DEETYA) collects extensive descriptive data annually and conducts occasional studies on a range of issues. Recent studies looked at topics such as literacy, dropouts, full-service schools, and math and science achievement. The six states and two territories also collect data and conduct studies. An important sponsor and publisher of research at the national level is the Australian Council for Educational Research, a government agency under the umbrella of DEETYA. DEETYA data would be fertile ground for longitudinal studies and comparisons between Catholic and non-Catholic schools. Equivalent U.S. government agencies, through their occasional data collection efforts based on representative samples, have provided invaluable research about Catholic schools during the past two decades.

THREE INSIGHTS FOR CATHOLIC SCHOOL RESEARCHERS

UNIFORM NATIONAL DATA COLLECTION

Because they are not private in the U.S. sense, Australian Catholic schools are more accountable to government. One advantage of such accountability

is annual uniform data collection on a nationwide basis. Each year the school completes a detailed census: structure, students, staffing, and finances. Beginning with a 1997 pilot project, schools have been entering census data on the Internet. By the year 2000, the paper-based census will be withdrawn.

The U.S. government does not collect annual census data from every nonpublic school. However, an annual census on the Internet could provide current and consistent data for the Catholic community. Possibilities for comparative and longitudinal studies are great. In addition to collecting basic descriptive information, each year's census could have a focus area determined by practitioners and policy makers. This would greatly facilitate research, evaluation, and dissemination of best practices.

DETERMINATION OF THE SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS OF STUDENTS

The Australian government is struggling with a way to determine the socioeconomic status of students in its data collection procedures. A recent government study concluded:

Although socioeconomic status occupies a central place in educational research, and is established as a major influence on student achievement and participation, there has been no consensus regarding its definition and measurement. Given the importance of educational provision for socioeconomically disadvantaged school students, it would be of considerable benefit to promote wide acceptance of an agreed definition and to follow common procedures with respect to its measurement. (Ainley, Graetz, Long, & Batten, 1995, p. 132)

In Queensland Catholic schools, a comprehensive range of student characteristics is taken into account. These focus on students who: often do not have the necessary school materials; are nutritionally deprived; do not wear uniforms or whose clothing is substandard; seldom have money for excursions, etc.; exhibit signs of chronic illness; rarely have lunch; are frequently absent; lack interpersonal skills; are chronically tired; exhibit low signs of self-esteem; have sudden mood swings; exhibit poor management skills; come from single-parent families; are from families that do not have private transport, or require housing support; have parents who cannot afford tuition, are dependent on social security; have low educational attainment; or are drug or alcohol abusers (Ainley et al., 1995).

In the United States, a recent article in the *Phi Delta Kappan* (Baker & Riordan, 1998) raised once again the charge that Catholic schools serve an elite clientele. For a variety of reasons—honest assessment of school effects, political strategy, and especially fidelity to the Church's preferential love for the poor—U.S. Catholic educators should have a more valid and reliable

indicator of the socioeconomic status of their students. They need to define the constellation of factors that make up poverty status: family income, educational attainment of parents, place of residence, access to social and medical services, and ethnic minority status. U.S. educators can learn much from the Australian attempt to find comprehensive criteria such as those in Queensland.

QUESTIONS OF CATHOLIC IDENTITY

From an outsider's perspective, the overriding concern of Australian Catholic educators is Catholic identity. In a recent volume, a professor at Australian Catholic University enumerated the features of change in the Australian Church:

Passing of the conduct of almost all Catholic schools from religious to lay Catholics; apparent demise of religious orders and the rapid decline in the number of clergy; major disenchantment among many Catholics with the institutional church; almost total disappearance of any Catholic culture that was influential in the lives of previous generations of Catholics; evaporation of an Irish-Catholic sociopolitical identity; absorption of the remaining Catholic identity into mainstream secular Australia; decline in the participation of young adults in worshipping communities; demise of traditional rationales for the purpose of Catholic schools with the decline of Thomistic and neo-Thomistic philosophy; development of new theologies of the human person; recognition of the value of secular and concrete experiences of human life. (McLaughlin, 1998, p. 24)

Questions of ecclesiology loom large, as evidenced in two recent Australian Catholic University publications (Duignan & D'Arbon, 1998a, 1998b). Moreover, many of the survey studies in Australia ask about adherence of students and staff to Church dogma. One could speculate about the reasons for such attention to these issues: financial stability that provides the leisure for deeper reflection, a more doctrinaire Catholic history than in the United States, and a clergy crisis greater in numbers and scandals.

Two current instruments could provide helpful comparative data in the United States. The Assessment for Catholic Religious Education is an assessment tool that measures the religious knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and practices of students in elementary and secondary schools and parish programs. Information for Growth is an adult self-assessment instrument that assesses the adult participant's images of God, religious beliefs, attitudes, and spirituality. In the meantime, scholarship on Australian Catholic identity can stimulate much helpful discussion in the United States.

REFLECTIONS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH

The purpose of scholarship is to bring people out of the immediacy of their own time and place so that they may consider new, important aspects of their lives. One way that the Catholic community can achieve that goal is through enhanced international dialogue. On the one hand, researchers will learn that many of their concerns and projects are paralleled in other national settings. On the other hand, they will undoubtedly discover new approaches. British and U.S. educators have begun to work together on a variety of projects (O'Keefe & O'Keefe, 1996). Other avenues of collaboration are possible through the associations of educational researchers affiliated with The International Federation of Catholic Universities. It is hoped that this brief article will stimulate further dialogue between Catholic educators in Australia and the United States. Contributions to forthcoming issues of this journal are most welcome.

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Until May 15, 1999, Joseph M. O'Keefe, S.J., may be reached at Jesuit Community, Georgetown University, P. O. Box 571200, Washington, DC 20057-4212; e-mail joseph.okeefe.1@bc.edu. After May 15, 1999, he may be reached at Campion Hall 227, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467-3813.

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