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# The Grammar of Catholic Schooling and Radically “Catholic” Schools

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*A “grammar of Catholic schooling” inhibits many elementary and secondary Catholic schools from reflecting on how they practice Catholic Social Teaching (CST). The values of human dignity, the common good, and a preferential option for the marginalized are central to CST. Schools can live these values by serving children who live in poverty, are racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities, or have disabilities. This article demonstrates how a grammar of Catholic schooling has allowed Catholic schools to fall into recruitment and retention patterns antithetical to CST. Drawing upon a multicase, qualitative study of three urban Catholic elementary schools serving marginalized students, the article illustrates how select Catholic schools are breaking the grammar of Catholic schooling by practicing CST. Implications for research and practice are discussed.*

## Introduction

Regarding recruitment and retention of students, tensions between selectivity and inclusivity vex Catholic schools. Values central to Catholic Social Teaching (CST) compel inclusivity. Since CST affirms human dignity, the common good and a preferential option for the marginalized, schools that primarily seek to serve children who live in poverty, are racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities, or have special educational needs can be thought of as applying CST into their structures of recruitment and retention. Yet the private nature of Catholic schools drives selective admissions practices that frequently marginalize these same students.

This article reviews the history of elementary and secondary Catholic schooling and introduces the notion of a grammar of Catholic schooling as a paradigm for understanding the marginalizing tendencies that have developed in this historical context. It then presents data from three Catholic schools that seem to challenge this grammar by serving significant numbers of marginalized students. The concluding section discusses implications for theory and practice.

## **Historical Overview of Catholic Schools**

The history of the system of Catholic schools shows both inclusive and exclusive tendencies regarding the enrollment of marginalized students. From their inception up through the 1960s, Catholic schools were almost exclusively Catholic, especially at the elementary level (Buetow, 1988). Among this homogeneity of Catholic students, however, there was considerable diversity, as schools included students who were in poverty, immigrants, and English language learners (Baker, 1999; Jacobs, 1998a). Scholarships and parish subsidies ensured that these schools were available to students of all socioeconomic status. Vowed women religious played a primary role in allowing these schools to serve students in poverty. Jacobs (1998a) explains that religious communities often financed schools in creative ways “to provide Catholic education in many locales, especially for poor and marginalized youth” (p. 369).

### ***First Centuries***

From the early 1800s, the system of Catholic schools in the United States served as an alternative to the nondenominational, pan-Protestant program of moral education propounded in public schools (Glenn, 1988; Jacobs, 1998a; Kaestle, 1983; Katz, 1987). At this time, Catholics were predominantly an economically disadvantaged, ostracized, immigrant minority. As O’Keefe and Evans (2004) describe: “The [Catholic] schools were important tools for preserving cultural traditions and for providing educational opportunities that would help families achieve economic security” (p. 3). York (1996) characterizes Catholic immigrants as “rebuffed by a ‘public’ school system that welcomed neither their language, their culture, their values, nor their religion” (p. 20). York explains that these schools helped Catholic immigrants maintain their cultural identity:

From a public school perspective, it appears that Catholics uniformly rejected what they considered the Protestant and secular slant of public education in favor of the solidarity of a united ecclesiastical and educational system. From the Catholic perspective, however, a very different picture emerges. Regardless of the financial, political, or cultural benefits that might have accrued from a united American Catholic church, parish schools were allowed to flourish and fade within dozens of small ethnic communities. Catholics feared not only the taint of public education, but the taint of Catholic education that did not bear the unique print of their cultural identity. (p. 20)

As the century progressed, massive increases in immigration, especially of the Irish after 1840, led to huge increases in the number of Catholics. Catholics composed less than 3% of the population of U.S. citizens in 1820, but nearly 20% by the end of the century (Burns & Kohlbrenner, 1937; Havighurst, 1968). Postbellum immigration brought different waves of newcomers from the predominantly Catholic countries of Southern and Eastern Europe. Ethnic parish churches and schools provided these immigrants with social solidarity (Walch, 1996). This influx of immigrants shifted the demographics of urban areas, as Jackson (1987) explains: “Although only one-third of all Americans lived in cities in 1890, two-thirds of all immigrants did” (p. 70). Parish communities became support systems for these immigrants, helping them find apartments and jobs (Havighurst, 1968; Horgan, 1988; Morris, 1997). Because many of these immigrants attended Catholic schools, the system had a notable impact on the education of children in urban areas. According to Baker (1999), in the late 19th century Catholic schools enrolled just under a third of all children who attended schools in cities.

### ***First Half of the 20th Century: Stabilization and Continued Isolation***

After becoming established during the 19th century, the system of Catholic schools stabilized during the first half of the 20th century. Kaiser (1955) credits the broader organizational structure that was emerging in the Church for the rise of the system of schools: “The one most important factor in the development of Catholic parish elementary schools during the first decades of the twentieth century was the unification of schools within a diocese” (p. 116). The National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), founded in 1904, became a forum for the exchange of educational methods and ideas (Augenstein, 1999, 2003; Walch, 2003). At the diocesan level, superintendents were playing a larger role in bridging communication among schools, moderating isolationist tendencies of ethnic parish schools, and raising the quality of schools by improving the overall standardization of practices (Callahan, 1964; Jacobs, 1998b).

Throughout this period of stabilization, the religiously isolationist tendencies of the system remained. While many of these schools were increasingly similar to public schools in curricular content, at the same time there continued to be pressure to establish or maintain ethnic parish schools (York, 1996). As Walch (1996) states, such schools were “designed to cultivate and preserve foreign languages and cultures as well as to preserve religious faith and provide literacy” (p. 76). McGreevy (1996) describes the housing patterns of parish neighborhoods in these early decades of the 20th

century as creating close-knit and isolated ethnic communities. Sanders (1977) points out that Catholic schools offered immigrant communities an “enticing alternative” (p. 43) to the public schools, which “tended to impress a single mold rooted in the English language as the only legitimate medium of expression, English literature and history as essential to the American experience, and Anglo-Saxon virtue as the foundation of national character” (p. 40). By contrast, Sanders continues, Catholic schools were “decidedly amiable to ethnic interest” (p. 43). Ethnic parishes and schools were created as pragmatically feasible, reducing tensions between different nationalities: “In the ethnic parish, the immigrant need fear no insult, real or imagined” (p. 43). Some Catholic schools taught the native languages of the ethnic groups to bolster this identity further.

### *The System Peaks*

The system of Catholic schools in the United States grew into the largest private system of schools in the world, peaking in the mid-1960s at about 5.6 million students (Convey, 1992; Grant & Hunt, 1992). The socioeconomic status of Catholics continued to rise, as evidenced by greater numbers of Catholics in white-collar jobs or enrolled in higher education (Havighurst, 1968). Dolan (1985, 2002) describes these schools as a socioeconomic escalator for immigrant Catholics in the 20th century, and by the 1960s Catholics were proportionally represented across the socioeconomic spectrum of the country (Greeley, 1977). After the Second World War, demographic shifts in urban centers occurred as the rising White ethnic middle class moved to the urban edges or the suburbs, producing economically and racially homogenous communities. As Cibulka, O’Brien, and Zewe (1982) put it, Catholics “left behind in the inner-city areas of half-emptied churches and parish schools, institutions with an uncertain future” (p. 28).

Many urban Catholic parochial schools, originally created to serve immigrant Catholic communities, struggled to adjust to an influx of non-Catholics and people of color. In addition to responding to increased numbers of African American students, urban Catholic schools faced an influx of Latino immigrants, primarily from Mexico and Puerto Rico (Stevens-Arroyo & Pantoja, 2003). Moore (2003) describes how Catholics were forced to begin to address issues of institutional discrimination and racism. In short, Greene and O’Keefe (2001) summarize the 20th century as a period when “ethnic diversity in Catholic schools became racial diversity” but that while people of color were officially welcome, efforts to educate Native Americans, African Americans, and Latinos were often “limited in scope” (p. 164).

### *Shifting and Declining System*

The final decades of the 20th century were a shifting, declining period for Catholic schools. Hunt (2000) explains that “in the years following 1966 Catholic enrollment plummeted, beset by doubts about Catholic schools’ mission and identity as well as undergoing escalating costs” (p. 44). McLellan’s (2000) analysis of Catholic school enrollment between 1940 and 1995 identifies three central factors to the decline in the system: “the suburbanization of the Catholic population, racial population shifts in the central cities, and the virtual disappearance of women religious teachers” (p. 30).

The trends of declining enrollment and shifting priorities posed particular challenges to urban Catholic schools serving children in poverty, children of color, and children who were English language learners. For instance, students of color, especially Latinos, were increasingly excluded from Catholic schools by the cost of tuition. Greeley, McCready, and McCourt (1976), examining why Catholics did not send their children to Catholic schools, found that White ethnic groups reported “No Catholic School Available” as the primary reason, while people of color identified “Too Expensive” as the primary reason. Riordan (2000) shows that “Catholic schools on average have become more selective and are no longer serving primarily the disadvantaged or even the working class, despite the fact that a goodly number of minority students now attend Catholic schools” (p. 40). To this day tuition has continued to climb, growing by over 100% in the past 15 years (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2005).

Despite declines in enrollment, Catholic schools remain formidable educational institutions in the United States, comprising 30% of all private schools and nearly half the total private school enrollment (USCCB, 2005). Yet, as Youniss (2000) points out, these Catholic schools often bear scant resemblance to their predecessors: “Catholic schools that charge high tuition, place academic achievement first, are staffed by lay teachers, and have significant non-Catholic enrollment resemble only vaguely the system of Catholic schooling that developed over the past 150 years” (p. 9). Youniss explains that at the end of the 20th century Catholic schools found themselves, individually and systematically, facing a crossroads of “fundamental issues about [their] survival and future structure” (p. 2) and calls upon researchers to explore these schools “in their very diversity, their vulnerabilities, and their potential contributions to education in the future” (p. 9).

### **The Grammar of Catholic Schooling**

Urban Catholic schools have shifted historically in their service to students who could be considered traditionally marginalized. While originally these schools were generally inclusive to Catholic students in poverty and from immigrant communities, over the last 4 decades these schools have grown increasingly selective. Viewing this history through a critical lens reveals that one element to this trend may be some unexamined assumptions by educators about Catholic school design. These unexamined assumptions can be considered the “grammar of Catholic schooling.”

Tyack and Tobin (1994) employ the phrase “grammar of schooling” to signify the “regular structures and rules that organize the work of instruction” (p. 454). They contend that regular organizational features “structure schools in a manner analogous to the way grammar organizes meaning in language” (p. 454) and that these structures need not be consciously understood to operate. “Indeed, much of the grammar of schooling has become so well established that it is typically taken for granted as just the way schools are. It is the departure from customary practice in schooling or speaking that attracts attention” (p. 454). In short, the grammar of schooling is a way to understand how certain structures became legitimized to the point that they are unquestioned.

In an analogous manner, a grammar of Catholic schooling has inhibited the incorporation of the values of CST into the structure of schools. This grammar masks the discrepancies between CST on the one hand and structures of selectivity on the other. Recognizing the gap is difficult for many within the system because a school without such selectivity is outside the grammar. Such a school, in this sense, is unspeakable. This section will first outline the principles of CST, then review how these principles are reflected in Catholic schools, and finally suggest that a grammar of Catholic schooling has inhibited authentic response to CST.

### ***Catholic Social Teaching***

An ethic of inclusion in CST compels adherents to assist those marginalized in society (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977; Curran, 2002; Dorr, 1992; Hollenbach, 2003; Novak, 1993; O’Keefe, 2000; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004; Tropman, 1995; USCCB, 2002b, 2005). While referring to a coherent body of teachings regarding social relationships, CST is nevertheless summarized in different ways for different populations (Byron, 1999; Dorr, 1992; United States Catholic Conference [USCC], 1998; Vallely,

1998). Three central concepts of CST are human dignity, the common good, and a preferential option for the marginalized.

The first central concept of CST is an unequivocal affirming of human dignity, emphasizing “the incomparable value of every human person” (John Paul II, 1995). The U.S. bishops (National Conference of Catholic Bishops [NCCB], 1986) wrote that the “dignity of the human person, realized in community with others, is the criterion against which all aspects of economic life must be measured” (p. 28). The rights of individuals are considered intrinsic—not stemming from a social compact or subject to a utilitarian calculus (Valley, 1998).

A second foundational concept of CST is the common good. As Hollenbach (1996) points out, CST recognizes “that the dignity of human persons is achieved only in community with others” (p. 95). The common good is a balance between individual rights and the good of the wider society, and includes a “notion of integral human development. . . that no one should be excluded from the benefits of social development” (Valley, 1998). Curran (2002) explains that “Catholic social teaching rests on two fundamental anthropological principles: the dignity of sacredness of the human person and the social nature of the person” (p.131). Hollenbach (1996) suggests that this value has implication for action: “Catholic thought has long held that the common good is the overarching end to be pursued in social and cultural life” (p. 89).

A third central concept of CST is what Dorr (1992) refers to as a preferential option for the marginalized. This teaching holds that the Church is obligated, in the words of the World Synod of Catholic Bishops (1971), to first serve “those who suffer violence and are oppressed by unjust systems and structures” (p. 5). This dimension critiques institutions, policies, and practices that allow or exacerbate poverty, inequality, and injustice. According to Dorr (1992), this “option for the poor” translates into “special care or preference for people or groups who are marginalized in human society” (p. 7).

### ***Implications of Catholic Social Teaching for Catholic Schools***

Considered collectively, the values of human dignity, the common good, and a preferential option for the marginalized have profound implications for Catholic schools. The emphasis that came out of the Second Vatican Council was that Catholic individuals and institutions must improve the way professed faith aligns with lived practice and work directly to improve social, political, and economic orders (Curran, 2000; McCormick, 1999). *Gravissimum Educationis* (Vatican Council II, 1965) points to some of these applications and characterizes Catholic schools as similar to public schools in their pursuit

of cultural goals and child development, but distinctive in their conception of community. According to *Gravissimum Educationis*, Catholic schools should “generate a community climate in the school that is permeated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and love...[and to] relate all human culture to the Gospel” (§4). *Gravissimum Educationis* continues by entreating members of the Catholic community

to spare no sacrifice in helping Catholic schools...especially in caring for the needs of those who are poor in the goods of this world or who are deprived of the assistance and affection of a family or who are strangers to the gift of Faith. (§9)

A decade later with the publication of “The Catholic School” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977), the Church teaching was even more explicit in discussing reflecting the values of CST in Catholic schools: “First and foremost the Church offers its educational service to the poor” (§44). Critiquing the phenomena of Catholic schools tending to serve the elite, it continues:

Since education is an important means of improving the social and economic condition of the individual and of peoples, if the Catholic school were to turn its attention exclusively or predominantly to those from the wealthier social classes, it could be contributing towards maintaining their privileged position, and could thereby continue to favour a society which is unjust. (§58)

In short, the Church teaching is clear in its call for Catholic schools to integrate the values of CST, specifically regarding serving those marginalized by poverty.

Reflecting a similar sentiment, Dorr (1992) draws more directly on the values of CST to critique Catholic schools that serve the wealthy:

Some Church people...see themselves as helping the spiritually poor when they educate the children of the rich...This, they argue, is just as important for the Church as service of those who are materially poor. The effect of this use of language is to deprive the notion of an “option for the poor” of any effective meaning, since everybody can be seen as poor in some respect. (pp. 296-297)

Dorr continues by asserting that failing to challenge social injustice is tantamount to endorsing it:

The crucial question is, what should committed Church people be saying to the rich, by their words and actions? There are people who believe they can



move the rich toward greater social awareness by working closely with and for them—for instance, by providing expensive high-class education for their children. More recently an increasing number of committed Church people have come to the conclusion that this approach is not sufficiently effective. So they choose to challenge the rich by transferring their energies to working with the poor. (p. 298)

O’Keefe (1996, 1997, 1999, 2000; O’Keefe & Evans, 2004; O’Keefe et al., 2004; O’Keefe & Murphy, 2000) frequently applies values of CST in analyses of Catholic schooling. Discussing the Church’s social teaching of a preference for the poor, O’Keefe (1996) notes that the “implications for Catholic schools is obvious. If segments of the population are marginalized, the Church is obliged to make extraordinary efforts to rectify social fragmentation” (pp. 190-191). O’Keefe goes on to assert that the schools should also be antiracist, noting that the “Church eschews a model of assimilation to European cultural patterns and adopts a philosophy of cultural pluralism” (p. 192). O’Keefe (2000) also finds that “because of its gospel mission, the Catholic community is irrevocably committed to those in greatest need” (p. 227), and argues that this commitment applies directly to Catholic schools in urban settings.

The United States bishops have long held that the Church should be exemplary in its own practices and they recently renewed their commitment to providing schools that are accessible to the poor and disadvantaged (NCCB, 1986, 1995; USCCB, 2005). Lucker’s (1993) role as a Catholic bishop lends a particular weight to the critique that “the church, which speaks for the sacredness of all human life, for justice, for the poor, or for peace, must indeed be concerned about justice within its own life and institutions” (p. 34).

In sum, many voices throughout the Catholic community agree that CST has clear implications for Catholic schools. The emphases on human dignity, the common good, and a preferential option for the marginalized compel these schools to practice inclusion of traditionally marginalized students. However, the record of Catholic schools serving marginalized students is contradictory. Practices of exclusion and elitism in the recruitment and retention at Catholic schools are antithetical to the Church’s teachings on social justice.

### ***Increased Gap between Espoused Values and Practices***

Despite their application to schools, discrepancies between the values espoused in CST and the structures of Catholic schools are increasing. In the

final decades of the 20th century a disproportionately high number of Catholic schools predominantly serving students of color in high poverty communities either closed or consolidated (Greeley, 1990; Harris, 2000; Hunt, 2000; O'Keefe, 1996). The rising dependence on tuition revenue negatively affects the ability of Catholic schools to include large numbers of students in poverty (Harris, 1996, 2000; Kealey, 1990, 1996; O'Keefe & Murphy, 2000). Though an increasing number of students in Catholic schools come from homes where English is a second language (Greene & O'Keefe, 2001; O'Keefe & Evans, 2004; O'Keefe & Murphy, 2000), schools serving recent immigrants are often among the first to close (Hunt, 2000). Catholic schools have grown more diverse racially, ethnically, and religiously, but also have become more elite, serving fewer students in poverty (Baker & Riordan, 1998, 1999; Buetow, 1988; McGreevy, 2003; O'Keefe, 1996; Youniss & McLellan, 1999) and frequently do not serve students with disabilities (Bello, 2004; Benton & Owen, 1997; "Demographics of Disability," 2002; Owen, 1997; Preimesberger, 2000). These trends have continued into the first decade of the 21st century (Brachear & Ramirez, 2005; Coday, 2005; Dwyer, 2005; Zehr, 2003). In sum, while the social justice teachings of Catholicism (or CST) compel a preferential option for the marginalized, Catholic schools in the United States are often poor examples of how to enact these teachings.

Literature on Catholic schooling does not typically apply values of CST to structural critiques of the increased tendencies toward marginalization in Catholic schooling over the last 4 decades. Instead, these shifts are seen through economic and demographic analyses (Augenstein, 2003; Dwyer, 2005; Greene & O'Keefe, 2001; Hunt, 2000; Lawrence, 2000; McLellan, 2000; Nelson, 2000; O'Keefe et al., 2004; Owens, 2005; Powell, 2004; Riordan, 2000; Zehr, 2003). An alternate conceptualization that this article suggests is that a grammar of Catholic schooling has played a role in muting the critical role of CST.

### ***Grammar of Catholic Schooling: Students with Disabilities***

If the values of CST are oriented toward human dignity, the common good, and a preferential option for the marginalized, why have Catholic schools been slow to adapt strategies that reflect these values? The concept of a grammar of Catholic schooling is one way to understand the lack of a cohesive or comprehensive application of CST to the structures of Catholic schools. The lack of critical analysis applying CST to the structures of inclusion and exclusion in Catholic schools may stem from this conceptual barrier. This

grammar can inhibit critical internal analysis and belie exclusionary effects of admissions practices and pedagogies.

This grammar of Catholic schooling is apparent when analyzing the exclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic schools. The inclusion of students with disabilities is clearly aligned with CST, yet the fact that Catholic schools consistently do not serve these students is rarely acknowledged as a significant failure to practice CST. Instead, the grammar of Catholic schooling allows schools to blame the gap between espoused and practiced values on outside elements. As a result, most Catholic schools serve relatively few students with disabilities, especially students with significant disabilities, and when they do serve such students this is viewed as an exceptional matter, not as practicing what they preach in CST.

Catholic educators are often of the mindset that students with disabilities belong in public schools. According to Bishop (1997), “The development and education of children who are disabled has long been seen as the responsibility of the public school system and, more exclusively, the special education school programs of public schools” (p. 4). Yet increasingly Catholic educators recognize the incongruity of rejecting students with disabilities. Owen (1997) pointedly asked fellow Catholics: “Can we fail to match the secular standards within our Catholic schools and religious training? Will we turn aside those children with disabilities whose parents come requesting their admission into our facilities?” (p. 3). Studying how Catholic schools historically have served students with disabilities, Preimesberger (2000) finds that while public schools are legally obliged to serve students with disabilities, “Catholic schools have viewed inclusivity as a sense of responsibility to educate all children” (p. 117). Serving students with disabilities is recognized as aligned with the values of Catholic education, as Bishop (1997) describes: “Inclusion, defined as an approach to educating all individuals with and without disabilities in the regular classroom, is in sync with the concept of total Catholic education in its concern for the total development of all children” (p. 1).

In the past decade, families of students with disabilities have increasingly sought inclusion into Catholic school communities (Dudek, 2000), and by some measures, the Catholic school community has become more welcoming. For instance, in 1998 the NCEA published a short monograph entitled “Is there room for me?” which addressed issues related to the inclusion of students with disabilities in Catholic schools (Dudek, 1998). DeFiore (2006) argues that this publication “moved the issue to the top of the association’s agenda, especially at the elementary level” (p. 457). More recently, a division of NCEA, Selected Programs for Improving Catholic Education (SPICE),

has highlighted exemplars of Catholic schools serving students with diverse needs (SPICE, 2008), and the Department of Elementary Schools at the NCEA (2008) has hosted an annual conference focused on service delivery for students with special needs.

Yet despite these gains, inclusive practices in Catholic schools remain the exception, not the rule (Bello, 2004; Lefevere, 2005). Schools attempting to serve students with disabilities better often are faced with reluctant or even resistant Catholic school educators (Lawrence-Brown & Muschaweck, 2004). A recent study by the Catholic bishops (USCCB, 2002a) concluded that 7% of children enrolled in Catholic schools are children with disabilities, compared to 11.4% in public schools. Bello (2004) found that only 36% of Catholic secondary schools were serving students with disabilities, and these were primarily limited to students with mild disabilities. In the Catholic school community, serving students with disabilities remains a peripheral conversation. For instance, of the hundreds of sessions offered at the NCEA annual convention, approximately 11 sessions are dedicated each year to “Special Learning Needs”; administrators seeking sessions on including students with disabilities in their schools will find that less than 4% of their sessions address this subject (NCEA, 2001-2006).

Additionally, serving students with disabilities is consistently framed as solely a matter of resources, not of willpower. On the NCEA website question-and-answer section, the single question addressing students with disabilities asks if a Catholic school can accept a child who has a disability and deliver special educational services (NCEA, 2006). The NCEA response frames the options for the school as limited by resources alone:

Catholic schools are happy to accept students with disabilities if the school is able to meet their needs with “reasonable accommodations.” Since Catholic schools do not receive any direct federal aid (or state aid in most cases) to provide for all kinds of disabilities, some needs are too costly for the schools to be able to provide. (NCEA, 2006, Children with Disabilities)

This is the logic that dictates the initial response of many Catholic schools, which typically claim they would be “happy to accept” a student with disabilities, but that the “needs are too costly for the school to provide” and that the lack of federal and state aid is the barrier. Preimesberger (2000) describes Catholic schools as hindered from providing the same services of public schools “because of lack of funds, resources, and trained professionals in the area of special education. Also the simple fact of limited space and the large number of students desiring to attend has affected admissions” (p. 121).

Finally, students with disabilities are often treated unequally in Catholic schools. In a study of a Catholic high school that included students with different types of disabilities, Powell (2004) shows how a Catholic school provides services to students with disabilities through charging parents of students with disabilities significant extra fees. In 1985, when the program began, these extra fees were \$2,400 on top of tuition. Fourteen years later, these fees were cut in half based on fundraising efforts. Parents of students with disabilities had to assist the school in these additional fundraisers. The additional fees and obligatory supplemental fundraising for families of students with disabilities indicates the way these families are typically treated in Catholic schools. Powell conveys a note from a family of a child with Down syndrome in which the parents communicated to the principal, "It was most impressive that your first reaction was not one of 'absolutely not,' which is a response that parents of special needs children learn to expect" (p. 94).

Catholic school educators take it for granted that it is the lack of resources inhibiting their inclusion of students with disabilities. Ryan (2001) illustrates this by introducing a report of an innovative program for students with disabilities in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia: "Many Catholic schools clearly do lack the resources (*but certainly not the will*) [italics added] to provide fully for special needs students" (p. 32). Paradoxically, because they frequently portray themselves as ill equipped or under funded to serve students with disabilities, Catholic schools often fail to recognize when they do demonstrate successful strategies for addressing diverse learners. For example, evidence suggests that the disproportionate labeling of people of color with disabilities is not occurring in Catholic schools (USCCB, 2002a). In addition, some Catholic schools illustrate the pivotal role a school leader plays in promoting inclusive school communities (Myree-Brown, 2000).

More fundamentally, however, the argument here is that the lack of critical reflection on serving students with disabilities stems from a conceptual barrier as much as from a lack of resources. What impedes Catholic educators from serving students with disabilities are the unquestioned structures that have become inextricably associated with these students, such as relying on federal and state funding to support service delivery and depending on pullout programming and public school personnel. These structures lead many Catholic educators to exhibit a preferential option against the disabled. The presumption is that the Catholic school need only provide "reasonable accommodations" and if the school determines it is unable to provide these, the student is best served elsewhere. In short, despite the mandates of CST to include students with disabilities and despite exemplars of inclusive practices, most Catholic schools systematically and instinctively presume

that they possess neither the capacity nor the responsibility for serving students with disabilities.

### ***Other Illustrations of the Grammar of Catholic Schooling***

Considering other dimensions of marginalization, such as linguistic barriers, poverty, and racism, further illustrates this grammar of Catholic schooling. Assertions that Catholic schools continue a legacy of serving children from low-income families (O’Keefe et al., 2004) cloud the trends of excluding families in poverty and closing schools in impoverished communities (Brachear & Ramirez, 2005; Coday, 2005; Dwyer, 2005) and the limitations in the service of people of color by these schools (Greene & O’Keefe, 2001). When reducing one barrier, others are frequently ignored. For example, schools that do serve students in poverty frequently ignore the service of students with disabilities (Owens, 2005), or when including students with disabilities, the discriminatory elements against students in poverty go unmentioned (Powell, 2004).

Another example of the grammar of Catholic schooling is illustrated in Catholic schools’ service of children from immigrant families. Rather than merely a function of family income and inclination, a critical factor in the choice of a Catholic school seems to be what Lawrence (2000) refers to as “the carrying capacity of the Catholic schools” (p. 183) to meet their needs. Lawrence reports that Mexicans, “far and away the largest U.S. immigrant group, also have the lowest rate of Catholic school utilization” (p. 197). A grammar of Catholic schooling obscures critical reflection on what Lawrence refers to as the “obstacles or opportunities afforded by local school and parish environments [which] seem just as important [as family income] in shaping [immigrants’] school-choice preferences and decisions” (p. 197).

The grammar of Catholic schooling is also apparent in what is not addressed. For instance, the literature on Catholic schools tends to ignore how private schools are embedded in the class structures in society and, consequently, their educational and social effects are related to structural inequalities (Cookson, 1989). As Mirón (1996) notes, “patterned unequal distribution of school benefits...are particularly acute in inner-city schools” (p. 10). Yet these phenomena are typically ignored in the literature on Catholic schools. Cuypers (2004) recommends that “Catholic educators and schools should... hold fast to the distinctiveness of their traditional Catholic identity” (p. 426), making no mention of the increasing chasm between this identity and the espoused values of CST.

A final note on the grammar of Catholic schooling is that this phrasing has been employed differently elsewhere. Jacobs (1997) identifies six fundamental principles that frame Catholic education (theological, moral, parent-as-teacher, student-centered school, teaching, and subsidiarity), framing these principles as the central grammar of Catholic schooling. Differentiating the purpose of Catholic and public schooling, Jacobs argues that Catholic schooling is oriented toward substantive ends, not functional means. Curriculum and instruction serve a larger purpose, namely, helping students realize their vocation in life, or fostering an integral formation. The students are central to the purpose of the school, Jacobs states, for “the grammar of Catholic schools... [asserts] that schools exist for students” (p. 51). The students are schooled to see their lives within a clearly articulated theological construct. What is unspoken in this monograph is the fact that not all students are welcomed into this community. The lack of a principle of “inclusion” is not mentioned. The policies of selectivity that lead to patterns of exclusion are not articulated. The gap between the CST values, which are an integral part of the theological construct upon which the whole purpose of the schools are founded, and these patterns are not seen. This gap is not conspicuously ignored, but goes unmentioned because figuratively and, here, literally, this gap is not part of the grammar.

The concept of a grammar of Catholic schooling helps explain the absence of critical inquiry into the structures of Catholic schooling that run counter to the values of human dignity, the common good, and a preferential option for the marginalized that are promoted in CST. Catholic schools break this grammar by proactively engaging in the service of diverse students and reducing barriers to those who often have been marginalized. What follows is a description of a study of three such schools.

### **Radically “Catholic” Schools**

Though a grammar of Catholic schooling has allowed Catholic schools in the United States to become more exclusionary in recent decades, counter to the espoused values of CST, select Catholic elementary schools appear to be breaking this grammar and practicing the values of CST. Evidence from a multicase study of three Catholic elementary schools shows how the values of human dignity, the common good, and a preferential option for the marginalized can inform practices of inclusivity.

## ***Methods***

The evidence presented here is drawn from a broader multicase study of three Catholic elementary schools serving traditionally marginalized students. This study used qualitative methods to investigate social action, subjective experiences, and conditions influencing action and experiences (Carspecken, 1996; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glesne, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990) through a multicase study design (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). A selection criteria and purposeful sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) led to the identification of Catholic elementary schools in the Midwest where over half the students qualify for free or reduced price lunches, are people of color, are English language learners, or have identified special needs. A pool of 56 potential sites in a multi-state region of the Midwest was narrowed to the most stable and exemplary sites. The final three sites were chosen because they were relatively typical in their structure as Catholic elementary schools, yet exhibited exceptional success at serving traditionally marginalized students, and had administrators willing to participate in the research.

During the 2004-2005 school year, data were collected through interviewing, observing, and conducting archival research. Between 3 and 5 daylong site visits were conducted at each school during which interviews were conducted with 42 research participants from administration, faculty, staff, and school boards. Additional data for analysis included detailed descriptions, digital photographs, and audiovisual recordings of school events, along with archival documents related to each school's enrollment trends, mission implementation, policies and procedures of recruitment and retention, and funding and governance structures. In addition to using methodological rigor and protocols for interviews and observations, trustworthiness was enhanced by including the perspectives of multiple research participants, member checks of interview transcriptions, and the triangulation of data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

## ***Findings***

This article presents a reanalysis of this data through the conceptual lens of a grammar of Catholic schooling. The data did not show these schools to affirm universally human dignity, the common good, and a preferential option for the marginalized. Rather, gaps remained between these ideals and the actual practices in the schools. Yet these schools tended toward integrating CST into their structures in exemplary ways. Simply put, the evidence suggests that Catholic schools can avoid the grammar of Catholic schooling and better align



their practices of recruitment and retention with the values of CST through focusing on a discourse of community and an increased capacity to include.

The three schools in this study were St. Gabriel, St. Josephine, and St. Caroline (all names used are pseudonyms). Compared with other Catholic elementary schools, St. Gabriel and St. Josephine serve large numbers of students who qualify for free and reduced price lunches (>90%) and who are predominantly students of color. Nine in 10 students in St. Gabriel are Latino and most speak Spanish at home. All of the students at St. Josephine are Black. At St. Caroline, one in five students is labeled with a disability, and the school serves students with severe disabilities such as Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, and autism. These students are served in entirely inclusive settings. In short, in different ways, each of these three schools is an exemplar in serving marginalized students. As such, these schools practice the values of human dignity, the common good, and a preferential option for the marginalized.

*Discourse of community.* Discourse defines what can be said and thought, when these appear, and how they are validated as true (Foucault, 1972; Olssen, 1999; Usher & Edwards, 1994). Ball (1990) explains that “discourses construct certain possibilities for thought. They order and combine words in particular ways and exclude or displace other combinations” (p. 17). Community includes the students of the school. A discourse of community, thus, refers to how the inclusion/exclusion of students is conceptualized. The underlying social values that inform the discourses of community in these schools are Catholic (rooted in religious doctrine) and catholic (oriented toward all, or universal). These social values reflect CST that emphasizes commitments to human dignity, the common good, and a preferential option for the marginalized.

In the three schools in this study, research participants revealed that community was conceptualized in an encompassing way. The data showed three features of this discourse that were most prominent: (a) an attitude of inclusivity toward all students, including those who pose challenges; (b) a commitment to engage with families; and (c) a grounding in social justice values.

The most significant feature of this discourse is the schools’ attitude of inclusivity toward students. This is reflected in the words of Ms. Mayes, an educational aide at St. Josephine who has worked in the school for decades and is an alumna of the school, who reflected that the school “opens the doors to everybody.” She could not think of a situation where someone would need to be turned away: “I think they would find a way to bring them in.” Ms. Schuter, a teacher at St. Caroline, describes this attitude of inclusivity as part and parcel

of the school's Catholic identity: "You have to redefine Catholic here," she explains. "Just including everybody—maybe that's how the Catholic thing gets worked out."

Significantly, the attitude of welcome and acceptance explicitly extended to students who posed challenges. Ms. Rieck, the assistant principal at St. Caroline who has a master's degree in special education and a decade and a half of experience working as an administrator in various Catholic schools, described the difference she found when she came to St. Caroline:

Of course there are special needs kids all over—but they weren't as accepted as a part of the school community [at other Catholic schools]. They were definitely part of the community. But the teacher's attitude was more one of saying, "I'm not really trained for this. Why is this person in my class?" Whereas here, I feel like most people...know that kids with special needs will come here, and they know that Sr. Brenda [the principal] is doing all she can to get people the things they need to make this work. So there's a different attitude than I found in most schools.

The second feature of the discourse of community is the engagement of the families. An anecdote that illustrates this occurred during a visit to St. Gabriel, when an interview with the principal, Sr. Elaine, was interrupted so she could meet with a parent whom she was helping attain legal services. Ms. Wallace, the St. Josephine School secretary, portrayed the school culture as one of "hospitality and...caring" and as deep relationships being central to this: "It's not just the kids, it's the family: [the school] getting involved with the family and the children." Sr. Brenda, the principal at St. Caroline, described the openness of the community to diversity as a feature that attracts more families: "We have gay couples whose children go to this school, people from other countries whose children come to this school; there's an attraction about the diversity that draws people." In short, the understanding of community in these schools involved deliberately engaging and welcoming families, as well as the students.

Finally, the discourse of community is grounded in mission. St. Gabriel has explicitly committed to fostering an antiracist school community. This commitment is expressed in the mission of the school and reinforced by rituals and symbols. Nearly all the research participants referenced this mission. St. Caroline directly states in its promotional materials that it seeks to serve "a culturally and economically diverse group of children" and that "no child is turned away." The school's philosophy statement includes the commitment to "the values of inclusion, justice, love, peace and right relationships."

In sum, the data from these three school communities illustrated that community was conceptualized in a particular manner reflecting inclusivity toward all students, engagement with families, and the school mission or vision. This discourse of community was a critical component to the inclusion of marginalized students in the schools.

*Capacity to include.* The second dimension that supported these schools' inclusion of marginalized students was their ability to accept and welcome the diversity of students into its community. This capacity had two primary features: (a) the use of resources in the school environment to promote the inclusion of all students and reduce dimensions of marginalization, and (b) the school leaders, who both symbolically and literally articulate the ability of the school to accept and welcome the diversity of students into its community.

These schools attained and allocated resources strategically toward the service of marginalized students. All three schools engaged in multiple development and outreach efforts to reduce their reliance on tuition and broaden their funding sources. Diocesan and community resources provided each school with consulting services, professional development, and other resources to help schools in marketing and development strategies. In addition, each school exemplifies a particular strength in attaining and allocating resources.

At St. Gabriel, the school adjusted to demographic shifts in the neighborhood from White to Latino by initiating antiracist education and increasing supports for Spanish-speaking children and families. Because the majority of the teachers at St. Gabriel are White, the primary tool Sr. Elaine has used to increase the teachers' capacities to serve marginalized children has been intensive, ongoing antiracism education. Efforts to implement this strategy have included explicitly respecting the home language of students and creating a more culturally relevant school atmosphere (e.g., one teacher reported that "everyone [is] aware of how important it is to honor [students'] language and customs and cultures") and building caring relationships with all students, particularly struggling learners (e.g., another teacher reported, "The students feel that their teachers genuinely care about them—and I think that that is obviously one of the first parts that helps create this community that we want inside the classroom"). Hence, the capacity of this school to serve students who are English language learners is growing.

At St. Caroline, the most notable example of capacity building involved serving students with disabilities. Montessori curricular offerings and multi-age classroom structures, which are uncommon in Catholic schools, contributed to St. Caroline's capacity to include a greater diversity of learners. Focused professional development in St. Caroline is a second illustration of

how the capacity to admit and retain a diversity of learners in the school community is increased. The school's claim to base decisions in "current research in child development" is corroborated by the way teachers and administrators discuss their professional growth. Importantly, the focus of the professional growth is on creating a setting to support developmental needs. Finally, community organizations provide support for St. Caroline to include students with disabilities. Collaboration drives the school community to develop and deepen its commitment to inclusion of students with disabilities by providing information for school personnel and families about the benefits and challenges of such inclusion.

A key way St. Josephine builds its capacity to include is by fostering a supportive community for families and faculty alike. Teachers at St. Josephine build deep and strong relationships with their students and the families of their students. Ms. Harris, who has taught at St. Josephine for nearly 2 decades, emphasized the safe setting that the school provides: "It's a tough community—but...[children] feel safe here. They want to feel safe here—a lot of kids come here because they feel safe." In addition, the educators in St. Josephine benefit from strong relationships with their colleagues, which nourish and sustain them in their work and enhance their ability to meet the diverse needs of the children. Ms. Sterling, who has taught in the school for 4 years, described how this support was part of the school culture: "I don't feel like the people here only support you when there's a problem." Instead, she explains, they will often stop and ask, "What are you doing in your classroom?...Are you having a good day?" She continues by explaining "[These] things...keep you going and [help you] realize that we're all in it for the same reason."

The second component to the increased capacity is in school leadership. In each of these schools, the principal sets the tone and direction with regard to integrating traditionally marginalized students. More than mere resources, these leaders build the capacity of their school communities by articulating both a vision and strong expectations to meet this vision.

A key way that Sr. Elaine, the principal of St. Gabriel, builds the capacity to include is by fostering an antiracist community. She explains that her deep commitment to antiracism sustains her: "This is what I want to be doing for the rest of my life. It makes me not want to give up. But it's really a long-term thing...It's not going to happen very fast." This commitment seems to have a transformative effect on the teaching staff. Ms. O'Malley, a teacher in the middle school for 3 years with decades of experience working as a teacher in other Catholic schools, credits "the leadership at this school, especially Sr. Elaine" for encouraging her to learn how to "have a more open kind of education going on for people that are [of] a different culture than myself."

Ms. Beck, who has been at St. Gabriel for nearly 2 decades, spoke of Sr. Elaine as a leader “you can approach...about anything” and credits her for creating “a great sense of community and family” in the school. Hence, as a school leader with an abiding dedication to promoting antiracism, Sr. Elaine is steadily building the capacity of her school community to be antiracist.

Sr. Brenda, principal of St. Caroline, is crafting a community committed to serving students with disabilities. Part of this stems from her personal vision for the school upon which she was not willing to negotiate: “If it was going to be at a Catholic school it had to be inclusive.” When it came to accepting and including students with significant disabilities, Sr. Brenda first secured the necessary external supports for the teachers, then explained to them, “We’re just doing this. We’re doing the next right thing to do.” Sr. Brenda’s strategic hiring illustrates another key way she enhances the capacity of her school community to support the developmental needs of all children. She asks all candidates: “Are you open to working with children with special needs? How do you feel about working with children with special needs?” to ensure that her teachers are willing to adapt and change based on the differing needs of the individuals in their rooms.

Ms. Green, principal of St. Josephine, is the cornerstone on which the whole enterprise rests. As the school secretary reported, “What’s really making this school...is Ms. Green. She’s there for everyone...She helps the staff, the teachers, anyone who walks through that door. She’s the glue to the school, and I think she’s what keeps us open.” As a taskmaster, Ms. Green instills these high expectations in her staff. She balances these with deliberate, detailed coaching. The vision that seems to guide Ms. Green’s leadership is one of a ministry of service. The idea that the work in the school is not just a job, but also a ministry, orients her. By extension, the rest of the educators at St. Josephine approach their role with a sense of urgency, hope, and vocation.

In sum, through a discourse of community and an increased capacity to include, these three schools integrated the values of CST into their school practices. The discourse of community affirmed that all students, particularly those traditionally marginalized, were to be welcomed. The capacity to include accepts and welcomes the diversity of students into its community hinged upon the attainment and allocation of resources under the able leadership of dynamic principals. Together, the discourse of community and capacity to include emboldened these schools to break the grammar of Catholic schooling and demonstrate commitments to human dignity, the common good, and a preferential option for the marginalized.

## **Discussion**

This article began by reviewing the history of Catholic schools and discussing the emergence of a gap between the values of CST and exclusionary trends in these schools. Countervailing evidence was then presented of schools whose practices seemed more aligned with these values, emphasizing human dignity, the common good, and a preferential option for the marginalized. This final section of this article presents contradictions in the data and implications for theory and practice.

### ***Contradictions***

The three schools in this study were chosen because they serve significant numbers of marginalized students. They appeared to stand apart from other Catholic schools in this inclusivity, or catholicity. Through a discourse of community and an increased capacity to include, these schools show indications that they welcome all and practice the values of CST in deliberate ways. Certainly they seemed to be avoiding the patterns of other Catholic schools in becoming more elitist and exclusionary, counter to the call to serve the common good, and showing a preferential option for the marginalized. As such, they elude the conceptual barrier of the grammar of Catholic schooling.

Nevertheless, the data showed that these tendencies toward inclusivity were haphazard and incremental. While embracing antiracism and initiating changes to welcome students and families who are English language learners, St. Gabriel segregated students who posed learning challenges. While pioneering inclusive practices of students with disabilities, St. Caroline failed to foster significant economic and ethnic diversity, despite opportunities to do so. While serving significant numbers of students in poverty, St. Josephine virtually ignored issues of institutional racism. Thus, while each school demonstrated strengths, all showed significant limitations as well.

Moreover, the tendencies toward inclusivity were fragile. None of these schools showed signs that the values of CST were deeply ingrained into their structures. None of the research participants referred to CST as a significant influence. All three schools were extraordinarily dependent upon the leadership of their principal to orient them toward inclusive practices. In sum, while these schools showed admirable signs of inclusivity, their commitments to serving traditionally marginalized students were mixed, not clearly grounded in values of CST, and each largely dependent on the leadership of a highly charismatic individual.

### *Implications*

Discussing the grammar of schooling, Tyack and Tobin (1994) point out that reformers often discover that “to alter the standard pattern of schooling” is difficult (p. 477). School improvement, they argue,

is much more difficult and gradual than many reformers suspect, particularly those who believe that it is possible—even necessary—to change everything at once, so interconnected are the strands of schooling. Almost any blueprint for basic reform will be altered during implementation, so powerful is the hold of the cultural construction of what constitutes a “real school” and so common is the habit of teachers in adapting reform to local circumstances and public expectations. (p. 478)

Still, Tyack and Tobin note that “cultural constructions of schooling have changed over time and can change again” (p. 478). The cultural construction of schooling can be a barrier to reform, or it “can be an engine of change if public discourse about education becomes searching inquiry resulting in commitment to a new sense of the common good” (p. 479). The implications of this article build on this claim that values of CST can impact the cultural construction of Catholic schooling to deepen these schools’ contributions to the common good.

*Implications for theory.* The grammar of Catholic schooling is a cultural construction of schooling that, thus far, has presented a barrier to the integration of CST into the structures of these schools. Select Catholic schools are disrupting this grammar through discourses of community and increased capacities to include. These schools are contributing to the modification of the cultural construction of Catholic schooling. This phenomenon reflects Popkewitz’s (2001) assertion that “systems of ideas construct, shape, and coordinate action through the relations and ordering principles they establish” (p. 158). The “system of ideas” encapsulated in CST challenges the structures of exclusion in Catholic schooling embedded in the grammar of Catholic schooling. While these schools are not explicitly articulating this novel system of ideas, their practices move in this direction.

Popkewitz (2001) presents history as not simply an interpretation from data, but rather a theoretical activity that fabricates (both fictionalizes and makes) its object of research. To this view, history is composed of different traditions of interpretation and purpose in which “procedures...construct objects through conceptual lenses” (p. 153). Consequently, Popkewitz asserts,

changes in meanings are not evolutionary, but instead changes in “principles of classification and reasoning that have no single origin but are the effect of multiple trajectories” (p. 154). In other words, problematizing the way in which certain categories and ideas delimit our thinking allows for alternative avenues to be explored. This article strives critically to recast the history of Catholic schools and problematize the grammar of Catholic schooling.

This article implies that educational institutions need to evaluate critically the grammars that undergird their practices. Metaphorically, these grammars can provide structure and order, but can also shackle organizations and mask injustices. Insidiously, grammars allow institutions to operate under the illusion that they are achieving optimally, when in point of fact their practices are artificially curbed.

*Implications for practice.* This article suggests two primary implications for practice. First, discourses of community expand practices of inclusion of traditionally marginalized students. Usher and Edwards (1994) apply this notion of discourse to how systems of education are constructed. They argue that through discourse we construct our world and that we can, therefore, choose alternate discourses to re-create it. Usher and Edwards conclude that the chosen discourse in education is central to effecting social change. The discourse of community in Catholic schools, where practices are more directly aligned with espoused values of CST, reflects elements promoting a “catholic” school structure. In other words, CST values of human dignity, the common good, and a preferential option for the marginalized create the language with which the school system operates. To wit, a “preferential option for the marginalized” drives Catholic schools to target different populations. Notions of “human dignity” and the “common good” as guiding principles radically alter the patterns of recruitment and retention in these schools.

Second, increased capacity hinges on both resource attainment and allocation and leadership practices. The concept of capacity to include that emerged in this research is not merely a matter of resources. The question of capacity is sometimes posed as, “Which children is a school capable of including?” The logic of this question implies that with additional resources, schools could be more inclusive. This suggests that capacity, dictated by resources, drives practices of inclusivity. The concept of capacity that emerged in this study disrupts this logic. The capacity is composed of both the resources to support marginalized students and the leadership. Leadership practices affect how resources are perceived as well as how the resources are applied in the school. Thus, capacity to include, while including the element of resources, cannot be reduced to resources.



## Conclusion

Sullivan (2000) claims that “Catholic schools can and often do function as constitutive communities that provide a foundation and context for the development of basic, deep-seated and stable beliefs and values from which the wider society can benefit” (p. 28). The values of CST, namely a commitment to human dignity, the common good, and a preferential option for the marginalized, provide these schools with clear direction to fulfill this ideal.

The path toward radical catholicity and the integration of values of CST is clear. As O’Keefe (2000) puts it, “because of its gospel mission, the Catholic community is irrevocably committed to those in greatest need” (p. 227). The USCCB (2005) calls upon Catholic schools to “be available, accessible, and affordable” (p. 1), and praises them as the Church’s most “effective contribution to those families who are poor and disadvantaged” (p. 4). The bishops assert, “Catholic schools cultivate healthy interaction among the increasingly diverse populations of our society” (p. 4). So long as a grammar of Catholic schooling inhibits Catholic schools from practicing the values of CST, these values will remain espoused but unrealized. Catholic schools that fail to reflect critically on their progress toward implementing CST are at best inconsistent, and arguably duplicitous or hypocritical. By contrast, Catholic schools serving marginalized students could become the cornerstone for building a system of Catholic schools that authentically and consistently affirms human dignity, promotes the common good, and exhibits a preferential option for the marginalized.

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