

ARTICLES

Catholic Schools, Catholic Education, and Catholic Educational Research: A Conversation with Anthony Bryk

Anthony Bryk

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Joseph O’Keefe: Let’s begin our conversation by talking about *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*.¹ When you look at then and now, how do you think the environment has changed? If you were to do a similar study today, what are some issues that might be different from those that were crucial in the 1980s, than in the early 1990s?

Anthony Bryk: The motivation to write *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* really started with the observation that first occurred in the work of

1 Anthony Bryk, Valerie Lee, and Peter Holland published *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* (Harvard University Press) in 1993. Most of the research for the book took place in the 1980s.

Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore and Andrew Greeley² that the biggest, most positive effects of urban Catholic high schools seem to occur for the most disadvantaged youths. This taps into a very long-standing theme in educational policy of advancing the equality of educational opportunity. Here were a set of schools that seemed to be doing something right and at that point in time we knew very little about the internal organization of these schools and how this might be contributing to those effects. That issue is just as relevant now and, in fact, in some ways more relevant than ever given the public policy press of No Child Left Behind. Even though there are some significant problems in the way No Child Left Behind has been formulated, its goals remain our goals.

O’Keefe: You also had two books published by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA).³ They were fundamentally looking at *High School and Beyond* data?

Bryk: It was a combination of looking at *High School and Beyond* data and direct field studies that were being done in 7 carefully selected schools. The difference between the NCEA publications and *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, in addition to the fact that we had ten more years to add to it, was that the NCEA publication was directed internally, to the leadership of the Catholic education system. *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, while still trying to address that audience, was also by design a conversation “on the wall.” We wanted to communicate what we had learned from this study of “sectarian institutions” that might broadly inform how to improve schooling for the most disadvantaged in society. It is actually quite remarkable that many of the themes that were identified in that book have really become central elements of public education policy: a common core of academic curriculum for all students and a more diffused teacher role where every child should be known well and part of the community.

O’Keefe: And an “inspirational ideology?”

2 James Coleman, Thomas Hoffer, and Sally Kilgore published *High School Achievement: Public, Catholic, and Private Schools Compared* (Basic Books) in 1982 and Andrew Greeley published *Catholic High Schools and Minority Students* (Transaction Books) in 1982.

3 Anthony Bryk, Paul Holland, Valerie Lee, and Ruben Corredo published *Effective Catholic Schools: An Exploration* in 1984; Anthony Bryk and Paul Holland published *A Report on Catholic School Finances* in 1985.

Bryk: Yes, an inspirational ideology. You see this as well especially in the new charter management organizations, like Achievement First⁴, the KIPP Schools,⁵ and places like that. In fact, I think about KIPP Schools as the secular Catholic school. If you look at their inspirational ideology and the way they are organized, you will see this intense focus on the internal social organization, the relationships that exist among the adults with the students, and how those relationships are a resource for educating children.

O’Keefe: Similar to *Trust in Schools*?⁶

Bryk: Yes, similar to *Trust in Schools*. The *Trust in Schools* work came out of an idea that emerged as we were finishing *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*. There is a little piece at the end that talks about how we might make sense of the unusual effectiveness of Catholic schools. Our analysis suggested that Catholic schools educated somewhat better than average students, but you could not really explain it that way. There was no indication that these schools had better human capital. Teachers, in terms of basic qualifications, looked very much like what you would see in neighborhood public schools. What really jumped out at us were the relational resources that existed and how powerful those were, particularly in the context of educating disadvantaged students.

I think the other piece that was there, in fact it is the one idea that I would go back to and actually try to explore further, is what I call the power of voluntary association. In every one of those schools, teachers wanted to teach in those schools and serve that community. The students and families were obviously making an active choice to be part of that community. So voluntary association is about choice, but “choice” frames the phenomena around a market metaphor. When you think about the formation of these social relationships, the fact that everybody chooses to associate with one another, this creates important social resources for school improvement, and I think it continues to manifest itself as one of the weaknesses in many urban districts, particularly where teachers are assigned to schools based upon bumping rights, seniority, and what have you. Those policy systems create a normative view that if you get assigned to a weak school and if you can stick it out long

4 Achievement First is a non-profit charter school management organization, operating a network of high-performing K-12 public schools in Connecticut and New York with the mission to deliver on the promise of equal educational opportunity for all of America’s children.

5 KIPP, or the Knowledge is Power Program, is a national network of free, open-enrollment, college preparatory public schools in underserved communities in 19 states and Washington, DC.

6 Anthony Bryk and Barbara Schneider wrote *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement* (Russell Sage Foundation) in 2005.

enough, then you can go someplace better, rather than thinking about, “I’m making a commitment to teach in this place, to engage these parents, to be a member of this community.”

O’Keefe: So it is the individual choice that the teacher makes, but then it is the fact that it is not the individual teacher, so in a sense it’s the quality of shared goals among the adults within the school.

Bryk: It becomes normative that we are here to teach in this community, rather than it is your misfortune that you got assigned to a hard-to-staff school. It is a very different understanding of what it means to be present in a context like that. I think we need to understand more about that power of voluntary association. This is a question that has very important implications as you start to think about how policy can be reshaped to improve schools in the future. One of the things I am struck by again, it really starts with the work in Catholic schools and has continued to influence my thinking for very long periods of time, is that we do not see social relationships, policy sees individual teachers, classrooms, but policy does not see the social relationships occurring around this and the power of these social relationships. Again, this is what is particularly significant about the Catholic schools we studied. If you saw schools through this social lens you would think about policy somewhat differently. The question today is: What can we do at a policy level that would encourage more of these relational resources to develop and be supported in schools and in communities?

O’Keefe: So if we are looking at studies of Catholic schools, say in the next ten years, one of the things I would take from our conversation so far is that we need to understand better the conditions that foster this kind of shared mission among adults within the school so as to create the right conditions. But how do we measure the effectiveness of shared motivation? How do you look at that?

Bryk: Well, some of this can be seen in survey measures. One of the things we have collected, in our research related to the Consortium on Chicago Schools Research, is a small survey of items around individual commitment to teaching in a school as well as measures of trust that teachers have with teachers, their principal, with parents, and I think these are very good indicators of the relational resources that exist or do not exist in a school community.

O’Keefe: Are there any federal data sets that could be mined, similar to what you did with *High School and Beyond* years ago? Are there relevant federal data sets now like the *Schools and Staffing Survey* and the *Teacher Follow-up Survey* that can be used to explore this?

Bryk: There is some relevant information in these federal longitudinal surveys, but historically these surveys have not really seen relational resources as a critical part of what makes schools work. So they tend to be relatively thin as compared to having the very extensive data that the Consortium has collected.

O’Keefe: So we need to conduct surveys that would produce data about relationships in a much more targeted way?

Bryk: Right, I think that is right.

O’Keefe: So, among all the pressing issues, you would place a priority on this question of the relationship among adults in a good school environment. What would be some of the other things that need to be addressed in schools generally?

Bryk: Again, embedded here is this question of conversations on the wall versus within the sect. Within the sect means focusing on the pressing issues for Catholic schooling. I have been talking about what are really “on the wall” issues. When I think about internal issues, I think that these schools face the same challenges as other schools. In some sense they are even more challenged today, particularly in the low-resourced schools. They are even more stretched for resources for developing teachers, especially because teachers in these schools do not stay very long. The capacity to attract and to quickly develop the talent to teach is a human resource-intensive enterprise. A school is only as good as the quality of the people you have and their capacity to work together. That is the relational resource piece joined to human resource considerations. So much attention in the public sector is being focused on enhancing the development of teachers: big commitments around professional development and new induction programs.

O'Keefe: Like the Teachers for a New Era initiative?⁷

Bryk: Yes. This is highly relevant to Catholic schools as well and it is also a place that, in my sense, is very under resourced. We are striving to make schools more ambitious in what they accomplish with students and simultaneously we have to make the processes more efficient to accomplish this. You are really trying to drive on two big issues at the same time that normally you think of as going in opposite directions from each other: a need for increased support and increasing financial constraints. Where and how you might use technology as an assistant here, I think, becomes a big question. How much of this professional development activity absolutely needs to be face-to-face and how might hybrid systems where supports are being delivered across the web is a rich area for research. The technology side is very important, especially as we think about this from the point of view of what it means to be well educated in the 21st century. What technology media literacy do our kids need to have? This is a broad concern, but it is also one that I think is particularly challenging for many Catholic schools because, again, this will translate into significant additional fiscal resources.

O'Keefe: It is often a resource issue. Getting back to the inside perspective, in terms of the technology perspective and instruments to build on these relational strengths, I would now like to talk about *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice*, which is focused on the inside community. Of course, the referee process is crucial to have an assurance of the quality of scholarship to assist researchers and practitioners in their work. While safeguarding that process, how could technology help us to change for the better? What is your sense of the future of education journals and their future in regard to paper

7 The Teacher for a New Era (TNE) initiative, funded by the Carnegie Corporation with support from the Annenberg and Ford Foundations, is organized by three design principles. First, a teacher education program should be guided by a respect for evidence, including attention to pupil learning gains accomplished under the tutelage of teachers who are graduates of the program. Second, faculty in the disciplines of the arts and sciences must be fully engaged in the education of prospective teachers, especially in the areas of subject matter understanding and general and liberal education. Finally, education should be understood as an academically taught clinical practice profession, requiring close cooperation between colleges of education and actual practicing schools; master teachers as clinical faculty in the college of education; and residencies for beginning teachers during a two-year period of induction. Boston College is one of 11 universities nationwide to have been chosen as a TNE site.

medium, electronic medium, and free access? These are all issues that we are trying to look at as we launch yet another phase of this journal.

Bryk: Well, the whole publishing industry is amidst extraordinary change. The traditional print media seems to be on a route to extinction, when you look at big newspapers and what is happening to them, to the price of books produced by academic publishers. The open source movement is building steam and will continue to grow. In this domain especially there are good reasons why ideas should be made broadly accessible, in terms of the way their rapid spread can contribute to development. So the question becomes: What is the funding model that can sit under an enterprise like this? Much of the open source initiatives are supported through connected advertising. It is what you see in the right column of the web page in various free access web-based publications and I think that becomes a real problem to try and figure out a funding source for a more academic project. You could see how the *New York Times* could do this, but how an academic journal could do this continues to be a question for me.

O'Keefe: Here you have a university consortium sponsoring the journal and we could eliminate many of our major expenses such as printing and postage.

Bryk: That is true. The infrastructure of the universities, collectively, can in essence become your funding source since they indirectly subsidize much faculty research and publication. Again, I think that it is important to get ideas out quickly and provide ready access to them. I do not think there is any question that is the direction to go. However, there is also a sense that these purely electronic publications are viewed as somewhat lower status than print ones. I assume that over time this is going to change. But what it might mean, as an interim strategy, you will still need to do a print journal, even if you just sell it to libraries. It is a status issue rather than what is the most effective way of communicating knowledge.

O'Keefe: Do you have any thoughts of how to focus the journal on the internal conversation, a journal that looks at issues directly related to Catholic education, or issues relating to education that happen within the Catholic school setting? It cannot be a journal about everything, because then it is going to be a journal about nothing. How can we stimulate a broader range of contributors, how can we expand the pool of people who are helping us to reflect on this reality of Catholic education?

Bryk: Well, there is another theme that actually connects back to the earlier part of our conversation that could be a focus of the journal: this larger question of the role of religious understandings in the education of young people and how to bring this conversation into the public space. I think this issue is a growing issue, of great significance more generally, as we think about public education. You see the forces all around us, just the spawning of fundamentalism, you see it in the growth of Jewish day schools, and you are also seeing it in an expansion of home schooling. There is a silent crisis growing about how to engage what would traditionally be called religious understanding as part of the way we educate, the ethos and ethics about who we are as a people and how we should live together. This journal can open up a conversation like this, but one that connects broadly, speaks both to internal and external constituencies about why we are here and what we are about. It might also bring in other religious traditions, and try to discern a common ground, which might then more broadly inform public understandings. I think that this is important internally, within Catholic schools, given that now these are almost exclusively lay led institutions. If you do not understand the tradition, you run the risk of losing it. What is the essence of who you are and what you do? It is also a conversation that in some way needs to find its way into the public space. Can we engage scholars and divinity schools outside of the Catholic tradition around this type of question? The journal cannot be focused exclusively on academics in Catholic universities writing about Catholic schools. *Catholic Schools and the Common Good* was a quirky exception in this regard. There are sociologists and economists who have done work on relative effectiveness of Catholic and public schools. So you are reaching out in that regard, but the Catholic aspect of these schools is typically not at the heart of their research, it just happens to be that they have data from Catholic schools. These studies are often interesting and important, but it is not field building work.

O'Keefe: Some of the articles I have read in a journal of labor economics, for example, focus more about the methodology than Catholic education.

Bryk: Right. I have got a good methodological hammer and this happens to be a good place to go use it. Again, it is not field building work.

O'Keefe: What would a field of Catholic education look like? As you know, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching pulled people together last year to talk about this.

Bryk: Frankly, I had some difficulty with those conversations because when you talk about field building you also need to ask why would you want to build a field here. We have a set of schools, that have an extraordinary history and tradition, that continue to close and we are in jeopardy of losing all of this. These schools are part of a global enterprise that offers opportunities to generate interesting observations if you could really get some good cross-national comparative work going. I think about all of this as a very practical activity, so field building toward what end? We can have scholarship, we can have systematic research focusing on Catholic schools, but in that regard there is nothing particularly special about studying Catholic schools versus other schools, though there might be some interesting comparative perspectives to explore. Clearly, the focus on the religious understandings in education is a Catholic education topic, but this is also the case in other schools that draw on religious understanding to inform how it organizes its work. So again I am puzzling about “field building for what purpose?” I remain puzzled about the idea of a field, what it means, and why we would want to do it.

O’Keefe: Of course, the conferences and the journal can help to answer that question.

Bryk: I think so and I think it would be very good to try and get that question out there.

O’Keefe: Part of the rationale for research on Catholic schools has been to demonstrate their effectiveness for public-policy debates.

Bryk: Right. I can understand thinking about it from that point of view. It is making the public-policy case for support; it is building a research capacity to inform the sustenance and continued development of the schools. All that makes perfect sense to me, but to define it as a field of scholarly inquiry, as a distinct subfield of scholarly inquiry, it does not quite fit. I am not in any sense opposed to it, but have not quite seen the rationale for thinking about it that way.

O’Keefe: One of the critiques that we often see of Catholic schools, increasingly I think with No Child Left Behind, involves testing and assessment, one of the things that has been accentuated since the research that you did for *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*. At the elementary level especially, just saying that the Catholic school is very effective is not enough. By what measure can one make that claim? I am wondering about, as an area of

development for teachers and principals in Catholic schools, greater savvy as related to measures of effectiveness and means of assessment. I also think that educators in general are not very sophisticated about that.

Bryk: There are certain areas in the public sector where enormous pressure now exists. I mentioned before about the big push for human resource development, professional development, and better mentoring and induction. Assessment-driven accountability is another one of these big areas. What sits behind this is that systems of schools need to become more effectively organized as social learning environments for adults, with knowledge development and management systems that really can promote a kind of continuous improvement orientation. Public school districts are trying to move in this direction, but this is a very tough course for them to follow. Where you do see it is in some of the new organizations that have sprung up, in places like Teach for America,⁸ KIPP Schools, and the charter management organizations. They have a strong learning-from-experience orientation; they are collecting evidence, they are constantly looking at this evidence, they are using it as a base for understanding more strongly their internal operations and how to improve them. So, the question becomes, can you create that same kind of evidence-based social learning capacity with the Catholic sector? Without it, it seems hard to think about how you are going to get more ambitious academic outcomes for more kids on very limited resources. That is the fundamental problem of improvement—so in some sense this is what we talked about before—the power of the social relationships, in this case how social relationships can support both adult and student learning. But now it is also a question about how to infuse evidence, how to collect and infuse evidence systematically into that set of social conversations so that you might actually be able to more readily inform ongoing improvement efforts. That is a place where this journal could really offer assistance to the Catholic sector.

Here is a casual observation based upon the Chicago work, but it could be a very interesting research question, it could even eventually be useful in bringing more public resources to Catholic schools. One of the things that we saw in Chicago is that young teachers in Catholic schools would eventually be recruited to teach in public schools and we saw principals looking for those teachers, so in that sense Catholic schools became a kind of training ground for new, young teachers. Nobody acknowledges this as a function and I do not know exactly what the numbers look like, but to the extent that this

8 Teach for America recruits recent college graduates of all majors and career interests to commit 2 years to teach in urban and rural public schools, preparing teachers in an intensive summer institute and ongoing professional development and mentoring throughout the first year of teaching.

actually exists with some frequency, it becomes an argument for why public resources ought to support these aspects of teacher development at least, because Catholic schools in these urban contexts are developing teachers who are eventually moving off into the public sector. So it is another one of these angles where you can think about research that could have real policy implications because of the Catholic-public connection.

O’Keefe: Given some of the work of *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, and here we are in 2008 trying to stimulate interest that would bring new attention and energy to Catholic schools, the goal is not to so much maintain Catholic schools because the Catholic school, like any school, is a means to an end. The end is about promoting the common good, dealing with drop-out rates in urban centers, the lack of educational opportunity, and achievement gap issues. There is a compelling reason that Catholic schools will actually help to address that need; they need to stay alive and thrive. Given that, and, given the fact that Catholic schools might have some promise in that arena, how would you encourage young Tony Bryks to do this kind of work? I would now like to address the issue of younger scholars who might be interested in this work, people who could actually work with practitioners, one of the goals of the journal. As someone who did seminal work on Catholic education, what would be some of your closing comments or advice? How can we broaden the circle beyond people who work in Catholic universities? How do we open this up?

Bryk: Well, one way to do this, to do this kind of field building, is to find research resources for young scholars. How did I get to do *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*? It was the NCEA Research Center. Typically young scholars have a hard time in raising money to do research, but you put some resources out there in target areas and you can bring people into the field. So as an instrument for field building, money targeted in the form of grants, maybe post-doc initiatives in this area, could be very powerful in bringing people in to this work. Then you do social networking around them. I think that this is another key instrument for field building.

Another substantive idea for possible focus are the new schools developing in Washington, DC that are Catholic in their orientation, but are not Catholic schools in terms of traditional governance. They are charter schools, but they are informed by, I do not know how they exactly describe themselves, but I would say they are informed by a Catholic worldview, a Catholic philosophy. I think that there should be a careful look at what these schools are and how they are doing what they’re doing. What do they offer? Do they

offer a vision of the possible, and what should be explored further in the years ahead? This speaks to the big issue that was in the original report to NCEA that dealt with finance and governance: This is a system, from this point of view, that largely has no future.

O'Keefe: Of course, and you know the high schools, by and large, have been doing pretty well. In regard to the elementary schools, I tell people, it is like the public sector: Affluent people are going to find the kind of education they want for their kids, as in the public sector.

Bryk: Which is exactly what we predicted, well over 25 years ago: that the private high schools were already starting to launch fundraising campaigns, they had a clientele. They were like small colleges, assuming they had some prudent leadership, they were going to do fine. But the ones that were located in very disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, whether they be diocesan or parochial in their governance apparatus, were charted for a very uncertain future, particularly at the elementary level, and some at the high school level as well, have closed as we predicted they would. There is no working model here to preserve and to grow.

O'Keefe: Some of the recent initiatives, like the Cristo Rey schools and the Nativity schools, while helping tremendously, while doing really important good work, they cannot be broadened really to provide a solution to the closing of the vast majority of schools. I do not want to downplay their importance. You go up the street here to North Cambridge Catholic; that is a terrific school in all kinds of ways, but you cannot reproduce that and have five Cristo Rey schools in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Bryk: Right and I continue to think that the resources of the future exist out there in the many well-educated Catholics who have been through this system. But it is issues around governance that remain a problem. There has to be some way in which you can capture public funds, and you can have schools that are informed by a Catholic tradition, but are not owned directly by the diocese, something akin to what we did with Catholic universities in the 1960s. Could Catholic universities run networks of schools, networks of schools that are receiving charter funds, and that are informed by Catholic tradition in the way they work? These schools in DC, though I have not been following it very closely, are worthy of close examination. Can a school be Catholic in its internal life? It is the balance between Catholicism as a lived experience versus more traditional and didactic methods of proselytizing; it is how this

relates to legal issues on the separation of church and state. There is significant scholarship to be pursued in this domain.

O’Keefe: Our conversation has been a stimulus to reflecting on the work of the journal, and a stimulus to reflecting on the field of Catholic education and research related to Catholic schools, and that is really the point of the journal. It is a moment for us to say, okay, we have got five years, we are not going to solve all the problems by any stretch of the imagination, but can we make a contribution and this helps to frame some of that.

Bryk: Well, I hope so, because that meeting we had at Carnegie last year just took me back 25 years. It is as if we have been in a time warp and people are looking up waiting for the bishops to respond, and they just are not going to respond. I am reminded of that quote from Kennedy’s inaugural address, “Here on earth God’s work must truly be our own.” Somebody here has got to do the work and we have to figure out how to do it. But there is no *deus ex machina*.

O’Keefe: We have an endowment fund at Boston College called the Collaborative Fellows Fund. It requires a BC faculty, a doctoral student, and a practitioner in schools to work together for three years on a project that is research based, but related to a practice issue within the schools. Perhaps we could institute something like that?

Bryk: Yes, something like that would be very exciting, and if you want to get more people working in the field, this would be the one I would go after. I remember when Pat Graham assumed the presidency at the Spencer Foundation, she put an enormous amount of her personal energy and redirected the portfolio toward the pre and post-doc initiatives and was very big on this idea that what we really have to do is to strengthen the field by bringing young people into it and support them and do social networking and mentoring by more distinguished scholars. That would be really helpful.

O’Keefe: Thanks, Tony, for sharing your thoughts with readers of the journal.