
BORDER CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: UNIQUE STAKEHOLDER ALLIANCES (PART II)

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This article presents the results of a qualitative study extracted from the dissertation The Impact of Catholic Schooling on Low-income Mexican-American Students (Watt, 1999). This study explored four case studies of third-grade teachers, their schools, and their classrooms, in a Hispanic cultural context. Findings revealed that the Border Catholic Schools were communities of consensus with regard to the nature and mission of Catholic schooling. All stakeholders "held the same stake," agreeing on the curriculum, instruction, and operation of the Border Catholic Schools. Part one of this study was published as "Border Catholic Schools: Unique Stakeholder Alliances (Part I)" (Watt, 2002) in Volume 6, Number 1.

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

In the Border Catholic Schools study, sub-themes emerged from the environmental and classroom factors that were identified through the analyses of the transcribed interviews. Environmental factors included important roles parents played in the education of their children, the climate and culture of the school, and administration and school operation. Classroom factors were also described in this study and included teacher characteristics and roles, instructional practices and curriculum, and disciplinary procedures. Most of these factors are described below.

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

The environmental elements that were described in the interviews and focus group discussions have been categorized into three main sub-themes. These include parental involvement, school culture and climate, and administration and school operation.

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Parental involvement was discussed in the teacher and principal interviews, and in the teacher and parent focus group discussions. Three areas were iden-

tified: parental support, parental communication, and parental obligation.

Parental Support

The principals who were interviewed attributed much of their school's success, and, of course, the students' success, to parental support. Melanie Jones, principal at St. Theresa's, said, "We have a tremendous amount of support from the parents. We...expect the parents to do their part, also."

Sacred Heart's principal, Sr. Margaret Montgomery, also agreed that because of parental involvement, the school has been able to keep the tuition low.

I think the parents are tremendous, and one of the things we do here, as opposed to the other schools down here, is that our tuition is low, but the parents make up for it in fundraisers.

The teacher case study participants also expressed that parental support was an integral part of the school's function. Suzanne Miller, from St. Michael's School, felt that the parents played a big support role just by providing certain experiences for their children.

I think we have a lot of parental involvement both with the parents coming into the school, and also what they do at home.... I think for the parents, it's really important to show their children that school is important, and that's why I'm helping out here, because it's so important.

St. Theresa's Maria Montes observed that many of the parents worked, which kept them away from the school during the day. Yet many of her parents did respond to the requests for help at special events outside of the school day.

A lot of times, we don't even have to ask. You know, they see and they volunteer. We get very good responses. Especially in the lower grades.

Parental Communication

In all of the schools, teachers and parents felt that there was an open line of communication between the school and the home, or between the parents and the staff. Several parents commented on the openness.

I'm very happy. You come, and the doors are always open for you...you have a problem, they'll help you. And the teachers are excellent. They're always there to help you and your son or your daughter. (Mrs. Ponce, St. Michael's)

There's always time to communicate with the teachers. If there's a problem with my child, they let me know right away. The teachers are very friendly

and open. (Mr. Gonzalez, Our Lady of Guadalupe, translated from Spanish)

Teachers who were focus group participants mentioned that positive interactions often occurred between parents and teachers.

I think we work very closely with the parents. You can come in anytime. I think that makes them feel good, and us too, because if there is a problem with the child, we can talk to the parent right away. (Mrs. Pequeno, St. Michael's teacher)

The teachers at Sacred Heart felt that much of their parental communication occurred on the phone at night. Some parents called the teachers regularly, and the teachers often called the parents, too. If the parents did not attend the parent-teacher conferences that were held each nine weeks, the teachers took the initiative to call them to discuss the child's progress.

Inez Lorenzo, an early childhood teacher at Our Lady of Guadalupe, described the communication between the teachers and the parents at her school.

Very open communication. I see my parents every day after school because they (the students) have to be picked up from my classroom. So if they have questions as to how they're doing, I'm able to answer those questions after school.

Other teacher focus group participants at Our Lady of Guadalupe noted that progress reports were sent every four weeks and that folders were sent home every Friday. Parents also called the office to make appointments with the teachers on their conference periods.

We communicate a lot also through notes. And they make us sign their assignment pad every day. We have to initial it to make sure that our kids did what they were supposed to do. And, once in a while when we have a problem or something, I'll talk to Mrs. Garcia. (Mrs. Olivarez, Sacred Heart parent)

Parental Obligations

Parents who were interviewed felt that they were obliged to help with the school and that they were a part of the school. One parent explained that without the parents, the school would not exist.

I know that you work harder here as a parent. You're more involved. And not forcibly, but you just feel you have to because you have to help the school...because without the parents and the school working together, it's just not going to go. (Mrs. Cervantes, St. Theresa's parent)

Some of the most common ways parents felt obligated to be involved were by attending the children's liturgies, participating in fundraisers, attending parent-teacher organization meetings, volunteering at the school, and helping their children with their homework. Sr. Margaret Montgomery, the principal at Sacred Heart, believed that the school continued to exist because of the parents.

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE

Nearly all participants in the interviews and focus groups described the Catholic schools as having a family-like feeling, being an extension of home, or being very united. In addition, teachers and parents described the schools as safe, caring, respectful environments. Having sisters and priests on the staff was viewed as highly important, and their spiritual presence was perceived by teachers and parents to make a difference. The small size of the schools was also believed to be a reason for the supportive, friendly school climate.

Family Feeling

All of the teacher participants expressed similar feelings about the climate of the schools. All mentioned that the schools had a family-like atmosphere, and that they felt a part of that family. Teachers also discussed their closeness with one another, the parents, and the students.

One of the main differences is that working in a Catholic school you feel more of a family situation. You belong more to the school community. (E. Garcia, Sacred Heart teacher)

St. Michael's is a family, and that makes it unique.... You know, some of them (the students) have been together since they were 3 years old. And the teachers, too. (S. Miller, St. Michael's teacher)

Everybody sees each other as family. You see the closeness between the teachers, the staff, the children, the parents...the school itself. (I. Martinez, Our Lady of Guadalupe teacher)

Safe, Caring, and Respectful Environment

The teacher focus group discussions revealed some common feelings about the school environment.

It's a very warm environment.... All of the teachers seem to have a genuine interest in the children in their classrooms, and outside the classrooms, too. (Mr. Duvall, St. Michael's teacher)

That it's a Catholic school, we pray and the Lord is with us all day long. So I feel safe, because it's a safe environment. (Mrs. DeLeon, Sacred Heart teacher)

I think respect for every single person (in the school). I mean, that's just an underlying value in our school, ...to know that you do. (Ms. McKee, St. Theresa's teacher)

Religious Staff

Several of the parents and teachers thought the presence of vowed religious staff in the school had a positive impact on the students. Three of the schools had sisters as teachers, principals, or both. The only school without sisters was St. Theresa's, and both the teachers and parents at that school, as well as the lay principal, believed that the pastor's visibility was important to the children. "They have Father Tim, who's always there (in the school). You know, they have a model, a role model." (Mrs. Sosa, St. Theresa's parent)

When asked how parents felt about religious staff, Sr. Margaret, the principal at Sacred Heart, responded:

They (the parents) definitely want a sister as a principal, and they would like to see more sisters in the school. And part of it...is the sense that spirituality is a major part of our life.

One of the teachers at Our Lady of Guadalupe compared her experiences in a school with religious sisters to one without sisters.

I felt like there was something missing...because I was teaching at a Catholic school in Riverton where we had hardly any nuns. And I can see the big difference in coming to this school where everywhere you go, you see them. (Mrs. Arteaga)

Our pastor, Father Jorge, is extremely supportive. He's very visible to the children. That's probably one of our strengths. (Mr. Rodriguez, principal, St. Michael's)

Small School Size

Three of the schools' participants described their school as small, and their enrollments were all under 300 students. St. Michael's, on the other hand, was two to three times larger than the other schools, and participants did not speak much about small school size. However, the teachers and parents did describe the school as close and family-like.

I would say size is a big element. Not just class size, but school size. The fact that we're small.... It's that closeness, that we're all close. And we see each other. I mean, the younger kids know us, too. (Mrs. Espino, St. Theresa's teacher)

I think our school has this small school, kind of, family atmosphere. (Sr. Margaret, Sacred Heart principal)

Maybe because we're a smaller school, we are more unified. We know each other better and that helps. (Sr. Stella, Our Lady of Guadalupe teacher)

ADMINISTRATION AND SCHOOL OPERATION

Unlike larger public schools, Catholic schools usually have fewer staff members and an administration composed of one principal who manages the school and is often a part-time teacher. Only one of the schools, St. Michael's, had an assistant principal; and two of the schools, Our Lady of Guadalupe and Sacred Heart, had principals who taught a class or tutored students on a daily basis. Both of the teaching principals were religious.

The hiring practices and personal characteristics of the principals were discussed by principals, teachers, and parents. A couple of the teacher focus group participants mentioned that they enjoyed working in the Catholic school because there was less bureaucracy.

Hiring Practices

Of the four principals interviewed, two of them expressed that being Catholic was a major qualification when hiring teachers. Ironically, the two who felt most strongly about hiring Catholic teachers were the lay principals. The two religious principals thought that being Catholic was important, but they looked at other characteristics before they looked at the religion of the teacher applicants.

As far as is Catholic a major qualification? Yes. To me, it is very important. I think it's probably one of the first things I look at on their application. (Ms. Jones, principal, St. Theresa's)

Being Catholic is the major qualification, for me, you know, personally. (Mr. Rodriguez, principal, St. Michael's)

In my interview process, there are three things that I really look at... First, is their love for children. And then secondly, is their enthusiasm. And then their preparation. Then on top of that, I'd get into a discussion about the Catholic philosophy of the school. (Sr. Margaret, principal, Sacred Heart)

Sr. Elena of Our Lady of Guadalupe explained that she did not specifically ask applicants about their religious faith practices in the interview. She did feel that certain other questions were important to ask applicants. "The first question I ask them is, 'How do you feel about kids?' and then, 'How do you feel about teaching?' 'How do you enjoy it?' and 'What are the things you enjoy about teaching?'"

Personal Characteristics of Principals

Teacher participants, teacher focus group participants, and parent focus group participants had positive comments about their schools' principals. For example, Mrs. Cervantes, a parent at St. Theresa's, described her principal, Ms. Jones: "She's excellent in the work that she does. She's always putting the kids first, and is very objective and very willing to listen to see what needs to be done and get it taken care of right away."

Mrs. Fuerte, a teacher at St. Theresa's, and Maria Montes, a case study subject at St. Theresa's, also commented on Ms. Jones' administrative style: "She is a leader. But then, what I feel is that she always gets the input of all the teachers. And then I think it is because of our principal, that she not only just leads, she's with us."

Sr. Stella, a teacher at Our Lady of Guadalupe, had similar feelings about her principal, Sr. Elena Barron.

She's approachable, and she's understanding, and you feel like you don't have to be scared to go in and ask...can I do this, or can I have the day off, or whatever the matter might be.

Imelda Martinez, described Sr. Elena as always being "on top of" them. She felt that it was important to have a principal to check up on the teachers on a regular basis, in order to make sure they, and the children, are doing what they are supposed to do.

The teachers at St. Michael's described their principal and assistant principal as being very friendly, open, and nonthreatening. The administrators were perceived by Ms. Morales, a second-year teacher, as "willing to work on any level."

CLASSROOM FACTORS

Of the four teachers studied, each had specific classroom practices that seemed to work well for their classroom and students. Teacher focus group participants verified some of this information, but also shared a variety of methods that they saw as successful with their children. The main themes that emerged from these teachers' interviews and focus group discussions were teacher characteristics and roles, instructional practices and curriculum, and discipline.

TEACHER CHARACTERISTICS AND ROLES

An important characteristic in three of the subjects was their Hispanic heritage and their ability to speak Spanish. Other characteristics included being Catholic, their dedication, and their ability to care deeply for their students.

Hispanic Heritage and Bilingualism

Three out of the four case study participants were bilingual, Hispanic teachers. Two of them touched on the fact that being Hispanic and bilingual were advantages for them in the classroom.

My family values, I see a lot in these children. Maybe because...my mother was from Mexico and my dad was from here, but his customs were Mexican customs. And maybe that's what makes me communicate better with the children and the parents.... I think I'm very blessed, being bilingual. (I. Martinez, Our Lady of Guadalupe)

It helps being bilingual because a lot of these children come from Mexico, and a lot of times, they know the word but they might not know the meaning or how to use it in a sentence or in context.... Or just helping them in their own language...helps. They learn English faster. (E. Garcia, Sacred Heart)

At St. Michael's School, one of the parents from the focus group felt that the school was very sensitive to the needs of Hispanic families, mostly because of the ethnicity of the families that attended the school.

I feel being part Hispanic, which we all are, that our home life centers around family.... And I feel like this school does the same thing.... I feel like...they're sensitive to the Hispanic needs.... And we're also sensitive to other cultures, too. (Mrs. Mendoza)

Catholic Faith

All of the teacher case study participants were Catholic and felt at home in the Catholic environment of the school.

I can feel comfortable talking about my religion. Being here as a Catholic, I can teach the religion in my faith, the way I know it. (M. Montes, St. Theresa's)

Since my faith's like their faith...it works really well because we...discuss similar things. And that helps them. And you're free to speak about God. You're free to pray. (E. Garcia, Sacred Heart)

Dedicated and Caring Teachers

Parent focus group participants and principals who were interviewed admired the Catholic school teachers for their dedication to the profession. Several of the teachers mentioned that they have often bought classroom supplies out of their own money, since the school's budget was not always sufficient. A recurring comment was related to the low teacher pay.

They're very dedicated. They're very patient, and yet, they don't work for as much as the public school teachers. I mean, they work hard...and they're going to find a way, regardless, of getting to that child.... And they don't give up. (Mrs. Cervantes, St. Theresa's parent)

It doesn't end at 3:00. It doesn't end at 10:00 (laugh). There's...a lot of times parents call me at home. And I've given parents the permission to call me at home, because they work. (M. Montes, St. Theresa's)

The Catholic school does not pay as much as the public school pays, so you admire these people that want to work at a Catholic school, and I think they're here because they want to be here, and not because they're bringing home a certain amount of money. (Mrs. Olivarez, Sacred Heart parent)

I think, in some ways, almost because we work in a Catholic school and we make less money, people in a Catholic school are more willing to go out of their way and do things. (S. Miller, St. Michael's)

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES AND CURRICULUM

In the area of instruction, several common programs and methods were found, as well as several differences. Some of these common practices included individualizing the instruction, putting God at the center of the teaching, having high expectations, educating the whole child, and having an advanced curriculum, which was aligned with the Stanford Achievement Test. Differences included some schools teaching values that were similar to those taught at home, while others did not. One respondent noted that differences occurred between values taught in the school and those taught at home. Several respondents perceived the achievement test as being culturally biased, viewed the Montessori learning program as effective, and discussed the services provided to Title I students by the local public schools.

Individualized Instruction

Throughout the interviews and focus group discussions, the concept of individualizing the instruction for each child recurred. An example of this was found at St. Theresa's, where the principal recognized that the fourth-grade class needed to be divided according to the way that the children were capable of learning.

In the fourth grade, they actually split the two fourth grade homerooms into what our principal saw as completely different learning styles. She sees that there was a definite group that they are just not auditory learners.... We each...have been asked to...adapt our teaching styles to the two different groups. (Ms. McKee, teacher)

Seeing as how the classes are not as large as the public schools, they have more time to individualize. If they see a child having a problem, or they see a child who needs more work...they can recognize that because there's not so many kids in the classroom. (Mrs. Sosa, parent)

I guess it's the attention we give each and every child here in the school. Like there's no child that is left unattended. Even if we have...a class of 20 or more, we make it a point that somehow we individualize the instruction. (Mrs. Won, teacher)

Imelda Martinez used an individualized strategy in her classroom to meet the needs of her students who had limited skills in English. She was observed teaching the entire group, then assigning the ESL group to the listening center, while teaching the non-ESL group. While the non-ESL group was working on independent practice, Imelda worked with the ESL students on their reading skills. Additionally, Sr. Elena, the principal, worked with each ESL child daily on his or her English skills.

God as Center

One very important characteristic of the instructional methods of the teacher case study participants was related to religion in the classroom.

As a Catholic school, our religion is really the focus. It's the main thing. It's...that Christian attitude that is always...predominant. (Sr. Maria Luisa, teacher)

My obligation to them is to teach them about God, our prayers. God is everywhere. I tell the kids, "He's in the classroom. He's outside. He's in the books, everywhere." (M. Montes)

And part of our philosophy...is to provide an environment for learning. And I think that one of the reasons is that we put God as the center of our teaching. (Sr. Stella, teacher)

I'm their religion teacher...I can even implement it (talking about God) with the math, or the reading...anytime I get a chance. We talk about God and...we pray. All day. That's our main focus. (I. Martinez)

High Expectations

Several of the teachers, parents, and principals mentioned that having high expectations was one of the reasons that the children were successful at their schools. One teacher from the St. Michael's focus group even felt that the teachers' expectations of the students were much higher than those of the parents.

We do demand a lot more than a lot of families expect. (Ms. Morales)

Because of our high expectations of one another and of the teachers, the children are succeeding. We expect nothing but the best from ourselves, the priest and I, and therefore, we expect that from the teachers, and hopefully it will trickle down. (Ms. Jones)

Educating the Whole Child

Several teachers and even some parents identified the concept of educating the whole child as the purpose of Catholic education. Mrs. Adame, a parent at St. Michael's, felt strongly about this subject.

Education is not just academic. It's the whole child. And you have to be able to work with people, accept people for who they are, have feelings for people.... Our primary focus and top concern is for the students. That the students come first, not just academically, but in a well-rounded sense, incorporating social development,...religious development,...academic development. And all the staff members seem to put that first. (Ms. Argyle, teacher)

Suzanne Miller reflected on the huge responsibility she had teaching the students how to treat people when they get older, and how to be aware of issues that are not found in textbooks.

I can prepare these kids. I can help them to read and to multiply... but the most important thing, when they grow up...I want them to be fair. I want them to think about the people that they employ, and what kind of labor practices do they have...to be people of integrity and character...to be aware of what the experience of other people is really like. That's really the whole point of Catholic education. You are supposed to care about the whole child. And you do get involved with...all their baggage. (Ms. Morales, teacher)

I send my children here because it is a Catholic school.... And I like for them to educate the whole child, spiritually, morally, and...academically. (Mrs. Mendoza, parent)

Advanced Curriculum Aligned with Achievement Test-Frequent Testing

In three of the schools studied, the curriculum was described as advanced, and some teachers were even using grade level curriculum that was a year ahead of the grade they were teaching. Sr. Margaret, at Sacred Heart, said that the teachers in her school used advanced curriculum at every grade level, and in all subjects except in science and reading. "The reading program is like a half a step ahead, starting with first grade and up." A new science program was recently implemented, so Sr. Margaret decided to stay on grade level with science.

At St. Theresa's, the teachers were free to continue into the next grade level's curriculum if necessary.

The curriculum is pretty challenging. And I challenge the kids, a lot, too. You know, a lot of times, I go beyond the third grade. I jump to fourth grade. I teach third grade, but I go into the fourth grade curriculum a lot of times. (M. Montes)

I'm impressed because they learn how to read early. They teach them the basics. The math basics. The reading. All the basic skills that they need. (Mrs. Olivarez, parent)

The principals and teachers who were interviewed agreed that if the teachers covered the material in the curriculum guides, the students would be prepared for the Stanford Achievement Test. Mr. Rodriguez stated that he did not emphasize the achievement test too much, since the school, as a whole, always did well on the test. He did feel that the test and the curriculum complemented one another.

Sr. Margaret of Sacred Heart mentioned that the objectives that were to be covered on the achievement test were starred in the curriculum guides.

I just feel if we have our curriculum in order, and the teachers are really following that, then the Stanford Achievement Test is just one more thing to tell us how we're doing. And it's not the end-all and the be-all.

I figure if they're following the curriculum guide pretty well, and they're covering the materials they need to cover, the objectives that they need to cover, that the kids are going to do OK. (Ms. Jones)

We don't have to teach the test. If we're doing what we're supposed to be doing, then it should all be covered. If I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing, then they're being prepared. (E. Garcia)

Values Similar to Home

Nearly all of the parent focus group participants and interview participants stated that one of the main reasons they sent their children to the Catholic school was because of the religious values that were taught in the school. All of the parents who participated in the interviews and focus groups were Catholic.

I think that what this school has taught him, he will have learned a lot, and it will help him in years to come. Just the values that he was taught here and the morals and academically and all that...I think that the way the children are taught, and that spiritual foundation. (Mrs. Galvan, parent)

Mrs. de la Garza, a parent at Our Lady of Guadalupe, felt that the religious formation of her children was the most important reason for sending her children to the Catholic school. She also stressed that the values and principles taught at Our Lady of Guadalupe were the same as the ones taught at home.

We are religious people. We are Catholic. It is my interest that my daughters grow up to be good young women.... Even though the Bible they read here is in English, the values and principles taught here are the same as I teach them at home. (translated from Spanish)

The values that they bring from their parents are Christianity, unity, prayer. (M. Montes)

The ones from San Mateo and the ones from here, their priority is their children, their education. I've always told my students that education starts at home. We reinforce their values. (I. Martinez)

Conflicts between values taught at home and at school arose occasionally, as Suzanne Miller, of St. Michael's, pointed out. She observed that many of the families valued status and material things, which conflicted with what they taught the children in school.

Teachers' Response to Culturally Biased Test

The schools of the study reported better-than-average achievement test scores; however, several respondents felt that the test was culturally biased, and that their students were at a disadvantage because of their language barrier.

There's some vocabulary that I find we don't use as much down here...it sort of handicaps our children.... They're not always going to be down here, so they do need to know these other things that are out there. (Sr. Elena)

Imelda Martinez agreed with Sr. Elena, but felt very strongly about the cultural bias of the test and its adverse effects on Hispanic students on the border.

The SAT (Stanford Achievement Test) is really based on children...from up North, or further in. The Hispanics...are limited in their vocabulary.... I wish someone from (this area) would make up the SATs.

Ms. Jones had similar sentiments:

I think also, maybe the bilingual...aspect. And I think some of those tests,

culturally, are not...what they're used to.... Some of these kids' experiences, some have never even been out of the town of Stonewall, you know?

Montessori Programs

St. Michael's and St. Theresa's have early learning programs called Montessori. In the Montessori method, 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds are grouped together in the same classroom.

One thing I think that is very strong (here) is that they have a good early learning program.... The children who come out of Montessori after 3 years, most of them are already reading, or they're ready to start reading when they come to first grade. (S. Miller, St. Michael's)

Sacred Heart used a modified Montessori method, and the principal expressed the desire to eventually move in that direction.

Maybe the better thing to do at this point is to go get Montessori training. I have really liked the Montessori program through working with it in the schools in Riverton, and so I'm...promoting that we move to that. (Sr. Margaret)

Sr. Margaret also felt that by putting the 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds together, the advanced curriculum would not adversely affect some of the 5-year-olds who were not progressing as quickly. Sacred Heart has been using a first-grade curriculum for the kindergarten students, who are 5 years old.

Public School Services and Special Programs

All four schools had some part of their population identified as Title I students. Each school had at least a few students who received special education services, in the form of speech therapy, content mastery, or computer lab instruction for students with dyslexia. Most of these students had to provide their own transportation to and from the public school. The number of students provided Title I services at the four schools ranged from 7.5% at St. Michael's to 54% at Sacred Heart. At the very least, each school had a computer van, a teacher, a facilitator, or a technician provided by the local school district. At Sacred Heart, the public school district provided more than just the Title I services for the students.

The public schools are marvelous out here...they even provide transportation for the students to the other schools. They do all our health records for us. They come into the building and give shots twice a year.... We have a hot lunch program and a breakfast program. They even send personnel to serve lunches. (Sr. Margaret)

Our Lady of Guadalupe had a specialized program to meet the needs of the children with few or no English skills. The English as a Second Language (ESL) program was designed to help the fifth-, sixth-, and seventh-graders learn English and then transition to middle school.

That class is for the children who don't know any English at all. And they have a special teacher. And most of them, by the end of the year, they're ready (to be mainstreamed into the regular classroom). (Sr. Elena)

DISCIPLINE

Students at all four schools were required to wear uniforms, and parents and teachers agreed on the benefits. Two underlying sub-themes that emerged when discussing uniforms and discipline were the equal treatment of children and learning respect and responsibility.

Equal Treatment of Children

Parent focus group discussions and parent interviews revealed that students had varying academic abilities and varying economic backgrounds. Several of the respondents expressed their personal views about equal treatment of the children.

I think one very important fact is that all our students are treated equally, no matter where they're from, or who they are, or what's their background. (Mrs. Anaya, teacher)

I think that it (the uniform) kind of helps equalize the children, you know, they don't have this fear...and they feel inferior. This way, everybody feels that they're equal. (Mrs. Adame, parent)

Respect and Responsibility

Suzanne Miller discussed discipline in her classroom at St. Michael's, as she perceived it:

In a classroom situation, discipline would be the ability to respect the rights of other people while still asserting your own rights. And to hold up your end of the responsibility that you have when you are a member of a community.

Several other teachers and parents felt that it was important to teach respect and responsibility in the school.

I know my class seems to take a great personal pride in developing themselves as good people, as being good to each other, as being good-hearted, as being helpful, and just doing right. (Ms. Argyle, teacher)

To me, besides the equality, it (the uniform) also gives them a sense of responsibility, and a sense of...they need to look a certain way to be professional. (Mrs. Mendoza, parent)

OTHER FINDINGS

In addition to the environmental and classroom elements perceived by participants as leading to student success, parents identified some lasting benefits that their children gained by attending the school. Most important was building a moral, spiritual, and academic foundation. Lasting friendships and networks were also mentioned. Two parents expressed that learning the English language was a top priority for their children.

FOUNDATION

Mrs. Cervantes, a parent at St. Theresa's, felt that the Catholic school gave her children a strong foundation and that religion and academics went hand-in-hand.

The main reason (for sending her children to St. Theresa's) (was) because I wanted a strong foundation...given to them aside from getting it at home first. I felt that the Catholic school, teaching side-by-side with God, with religion, would be one to help them build that foundation and keep it.

Mrs. Dominguez, another parent at St. Theresa's, had feelings similar to those of Mrs. Cervantes when discussing her daughter: "She knows what's right and what's wrong, and she should be able to choose.... And she's getting a very strong foundation for her to make the right choices when she's out in the public (high) school."

LASTING FRIENDSHIPS

Two of the parent focus group participants mentioned the importance of lasting friendships and networks that were established by attending Catholic schools.

...their lasting friendships. Some of these kids have been together since they started. And they've always been close. I feel like that's going to be a lasting thing. (Mrs. Olivarez)

Believe it or not, I think it also creates a network. It's like the friends that they make here are friends for life.... We all went to school together, too. (Mrs. Mendoza, St. Michael's)

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

For parents at Our Lady of Guadalupe, one of the most important reasons for sending their children to Catholic schools was because they would learn English there.

There are many benefits to sending my children to this school. Primarily, English...an excellent education, and each week they have exams. But English is the universal language and it's very important. (Mrs. de la Garza, translated from Spanish)

Even in our country, in San Mateo, you need to know English. For me, personally, it's the English (that's most important). (Mr. Gonzalez, translated from Spanish)

INTERPRETATIONS

The Border Catholic Schools study revealed findings that were somewhat similar to those of other studies on Catholic schools and on Hispanic student achievement. Such findings add to the body of knowledge on minority student achievement in Catholic schools. This existing body of knowledge, initiated by Coleman (1966), has developed over the past three decades with research by Biddle (1997); Greeley (1982); O'Neill (1978); Ravitch (1996); Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993); Buetow (1988); Brookover (1982); Valencia (1991); Ogbu (1978); Losey (1997); Lezotte and Taylor (1990); and others.

Biddle's (1997) case study of Dayton Catholic Elementary, a low-income, African American school, revealed parental perceptions that mirrored those found in the Border Catholic Schools. The Catholic school's sense of community and family atmosphere, teacher dedication, cooperation with parents, and the distinctiveness, not exclusiveness, of the school were described in both studies.

Greeley (1982) and O'Neill (1978) found that parents of Catholic school children were more interested stakeholders than public school parents, and that they provided a home environment conducive to learning. One Border Catholic School teacher thought that Catholic school parents provided more experiences through travel, books, and computers, than did the public school parents. More importantly, the religious and cultural values that were taught at home were reinforced at school, and vice versa.

Ravitch (1996) identified several characteristics of Catholic schooling that she felt were related to student success. They were: (1) focused mission, (2) rigorous academics, (3) basic curriculum, and (4) high expectations. The Border Catholic Schools incorporated all of these characteristics.

Two interesting findings of this study, which were also found by Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993) in their studies, were Christian personalism and subsidiarity of each school. Christian personalism was defined as the extended role of the faculty to care about what kinds of people their students became. Buetow (1988) also agreed that teachers in Catholic schools extended themselves beyond the school day, and that teaching in the Catholic school was not "just a job." This was apparent in the Border Catholic School teacher case study interviews. Teachers believed that it was their duty to prepare students

for the rest of their lives, and to teach them the importance of treating people fairly. Teacher case study participants described teaching in a Catholic school as not knowing where and when the job ends.

In Bryk, Lee, and Holland's (1993) study, subsidiarity referred to the lack of bureaucracy in the Catholic schools. The Border Catholic School teachers attributed freedom and creativity in the classroom to personalized administration and lack of bureaucracy. In other words, teachers believed that they were able to use whatever means necessary to help their students to learn, and the administrators were highly supportive of their efforts.

Two findings that emerged from the Border Catholic Schools study are related to research by Brookover (1982) and Valencia (1991) on effective teaching practices for low-income minorities, specifically, Mexican Americans. High teacher expectations and the development of student self-esteem were related to the success of low-income Mexican-American students in this study. The trickle-down effect of high expectations was explained by one principal, who thought that it would inevitably lead students to believe they were capable of being successful. Praise and encouragement were used often in the classrooms studied, and the use of a more advanced curriculum was evidence of the high expectations teachers had for their students.

Ogbu (1978) also found that students from high-poverty backgrounds needed their self-esteem developed through the use of culture and language in the classroom. Three of the Border Catholic School teachers had Hispanic backgrounds and were also bilingual. The teacher from St. Michael's, though not Hispanic, placed high value on teaching respect for diverse cultures in the classroom; and respect for all cultures and religions was central to the philosophies of the Border Catholic Schools' stakeholders.

Losey's (1997) study identified negative teacher behaviors toward Mexican American students. These included giving less praise and encouragement, accepting fewer ideas of Mexican American students, and questioning Mexican American students less often. In the Border Catholic Schools, classrooms were 65% to 100% Mexican American, and, therefore, all students were equally included in class participation. Border Catholic School teachers exhibited positive teacher-student interaction through praise, encouragement, acceptance of ideas, and questioning of all students in the class.

Familial and informal relationships between teachers and students were characteristics Losey (1997) found in successful Mexican American classrooms. Of the four Border Catholic School classrooms that were observed, teachers and students interacted informally as well as formally, and all teachers knew most, if not all, of the students in the school.

The five characteristics of effective schools, as defined in *Case Studies in Effective Schools Research* (Lezotte & Taylor, 1990), included positive

school climates, clear and focused school missions, strong instructional leadership, teacher behaviors which convey high expectations, and frequent monitoring of student progress. All of these characteristics were either observed in the Border Catholic School classrooms or identified by Border Catholic School teachers, parents, or principals.

CONCLUSIONS

Gammage (as cited in Silver, 1994) emphasized the importance of a supportive atmosphere in the education of children. In the four Border Catholic Schools, this positive support originated from the teachers, parents, and principals and the religious values they share. Pivotal points of Catholic schooling, which were related to the positive and supportive school atmosphere, emerged in this study, and included teachers, school culture and climate, curriculum, parents, administrators, and religion. All of these points were interconnected, and it appears that if any were removed all others would be negatively affected. For example, if religion were removed from the Catholic schooling process, the parents, teachers, and administrators would not believe that the goals of the school could meet the educational needs of the students. This unique situation would not be present in public schools.

The main characteristic of the Border Catholic Schools was the religious nature of the school as identified by interview and focus group participants. Not only were the teachers and principals Catholic, but the parents who chose to send their children to the schools also had deeply religious, Catholic beliefs. The curriculum reflected the Catholic religion, and teachers placed God at the center of instruction, whether it was in religion or math class. The Catholic religious beliefs were shared by all of those involved in the school; and those few non-Catholic parents or teachers embraced and respected Catholic religion.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The high-poverty area and the high concentration of Mexican American Catholics in the geographic region of this study created a setting that would be difficult to replicate anywhere in this country. However, with the number of Hispanic students increasing nationwide each year, further study of Hispanic students in Catholic schools is recommended. One question that can be raised is: how can the findings of this study be applied to other schools with high percentages of Mexican American students?

Since the enrollment of non-Catholic students and the employment of non-Catholic teachers in Catholic schools continue to rise, an examination of these phenomena would be valuable. Questions to be answered include: In Catholic schools with predominantly non-Catholic students, are the goals and missions the same as those of the Catholic schools that are composed of

mostly Catholic students? Are these schools operated by lay or religious administrators?

A historical study of one or more Catholic schools on the Texas-Mexico border is also recommended. Several Catholic schools on the border were established long before their public counterparts, and an investigation of their goals and missions and how they have evolved over the years would add value to the existing body of knowledge on the history of Catholic education in this country.

All participants in the study appeared to come to consensus as to the mission, goals, and values of Catholic schooling. This consensus is unique in that all stakeholders were "holding the same stake," and no evidence of personal agendas was present in the schools of study. The teachers, principals, and parents were all involved in the process of Catholic education for the same reasons. These reasons include the moral development of children, advanced academic curriculum, religious education, and safe learning environment. All of the stakeholders had a central educational focus that had its basis in the Catholic religion.

In conclusion, the author chose to coin the phrase *congruous alliance* to describe the reason for successful Mexican American students in the Border Catholic Schools. In other words, all stakeholders (parents, teachers, administrators, and students) were not only bound together by, but were also in agreement with, the mission, goals, and values of the Catholic school. High achievement by the Mexican American students in the Border Catholic Schools certainly can be attributed to this unique alliance.

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