

March 2015

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## Recommended Citation

Bradley-Levine, J., & Carr, K. A. (2015). Critical Theory and Catholic Social Teaching: A Research Framework for Catholic Schools. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 18 (2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.1802032015>

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## Critical Theory and Catholic Social Teaching: A Research Framework for Catholic Schools

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*In this article, the authors share findings from an ethnographic study drawn from an evaluation of an after-school program directed by a Catholic diocese to meet the educational needs of children attending urban Catholic schools. The authors used critical research methods within the context of Catholic social teaching (CST) as a theoretical framework for the data presented in this article. Two themes emerged during this data collection and analysis. The first theme, student interactions, describes the helpful ways that students engaged with each other during the after-school program, and also the manner in which students exhibited a need for greater supports. The second theme, staff-student and staff-families interactions, explains how staff members connected with students in the after-school program, and their families and experiences. The focus on relationships emerged as an explicit connection to the CST themes of care, solidarity, and community within the after-school program sites. These findings have implications for researchers and educators working in Catholic and/or urban schools, or their respective after-school programs.*

### Keywords

critical theory, Catholic Social Teaching, urban schools, Catholic schools, after-school programs

**I**n this article, we demonstrate the application of critical research methods in the context of our Catholic worldview. The case we share focuses on our evaluation of an after-school program directed by a Catholic diocese. The diocese established this after-school program to meet the educational needs of children attending low-performing and high-poverty Catholic schools that were part of an urban consortium of Catholic schools. The diocese financially supported these schools as part of its social justice mission. We felt it appropriate to apply critical research methods within the context of Catholic social teaching (CST) as a theoretical framework for the study. This

*Journal of Catholic Education*, Vol. 18, No.2, March 2015, 27-43. This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 International License. doi: 10.15365/joce.1802032015

framework provided us an opportunity to analyze the ways that the program addressed the diocese's overarching social justice mission.

The evaluation research was funded through the 21st Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) Grant, the largest federal grantor of after-school programs in the nation. An external evaluation of program operations and outcomes is required for all 21st CCLC awardees, one of whom was the urban consortium of Catholic schools we studied. The complete set of findings from this after-school program evaluation is larger than the intent of this article. Any readers interested in these findings are encouraged to contact the authors. This article, rather, exhibits critical research methods applied in the context of a Catholic worldview and the research taking place within the after-school program situated at a network of diverse urban Catholic elementary schools.

To begin, our critical worldview is informed by our experiences teaching in urban schools, attending the same graduate program in education, and identifying as Catholics. Further, because we feel that a just and equitable society (particularly in urban schools) has not yet been reached, our position in seeking opportunities to actively work for social justice in schools and within our communities has been and continues to be influenced by the faith tradition we claim. Cochran-Smith and colleagues (2000) retold the evolutions of their own understandings of social justice in education, relating that many life and world events contributed to their identities as researchers and educators for social justice. We have likewise been influenced by several experiences including our own backgrounds in education and the social teachings of the Catholic Church, in particular, the emphasis of this article.

We positioned our beliefs about social justice and education in the overall research framework when studying the Catholic schools' after-school program. Our backgrounds as former urban teachers allowed us to build rapport with staff/students and to understand the values underlying the after-school program components. This awareness had been at the forefront of our work with the diocese, and allowed us to reflect on our role as researchers throughout our partnerships in the research process. One aim included our effort to "search for knowledge" throughout the data collection and reporting in order to better "serve humanity" via the children, families, and staff involved (John Paul II, 1990).

### Theoretical Framework

Many researchers employ critical theory as a theoretical orientation—or “map”—that aids the researcher in approaching her work. This position calls on the researcher to design studies that are both sensitive to power imbalances, and that help “empower human beings to transcend constraints” through “dialogic and dialectical methodology” (Creswell, 2007, p. 27; Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). A thoughtfully designed critical study ensures that the perspectives of both parties are intentionally oriented toward the specific end of re-examining issues of power. According to Kincheloe and McLaren (2003):

A critical social theory is concerned in particular with issues of power and justice and the ways that the economy, matters of race, class, and gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion and other social institutions, and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system. (pp. 436–437)

In addition, a dialectic methodology requires a back-and-forth interaction between the researcher and the participants, in which both parties are sensitive to the other and the personhood that each brings to the project.

The call to work for social justice embedded in critical theory aligns with a similar vocation rooted in Catholic social teaching (CST). The Catholic person must not only work to alter the circumstances of individuals, but also strive for institutional change (Roman & Baybado, 2008). As such, those who work within institutions, such as education researchers, are called to work for systemic changes that will create more just institutions. According to the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, “Social institutions do not of themselves guarantee, as if automatically, the common good; the internal ‘renewal of the Christian spirit’ *must precede* the commitment to improve society” (Pontifical Council, 2004, p. 240). Thus, individuals cannot rely on institutions such as schools to promote justice simply because they are organized or supported by the Church or the state. Instead, just institutions can only exist when individuals with ethical or moral motivations are acting within them. This commitment represents a reliance on agency, whereby individuals have the ability and the obligation to work for justice, and is similar to that found among critical researchers.

Both critical theory and CST focus on the distribution of power. Critical theory requires “enlightenment” and “emancipation,” whereby power rela-

tions are studied to determine which individuals or groups are advantaged and which are disadvantaged, and oppressive authorities are uncovered to allow struggling groups to form the “decisions that crucially affect their lives” (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003, p. 437). In other words, critical theory requires researchers to take an active role in reconstructing the power relationships present among all stakeholders within and around places of social enactment. Likewise, CST calls upon Catholics to act alongside the oppressed in an effort to end repressive situations and structures. The earliest foundations of CST appear in the Old Testament where God guides the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Hearing the prayers of the oppressed, He acts to protect their interests including their liberty and right to earn a just wage (Roman & Baybado, 2008). In this Biblical example, we see an emphasis on the connectedness of individuals through which one person’s actions have the potential to affect others in positive or negative ways, and where individuals have a responsibility to respond to the needs of others—especially those who have been marginalized by oppressive situations, institutions, policies, histories, and so forth.

CST for the modern world was developed through encyclicals and letters written by the popes. These focused on a global world in which the human condition is shared rather than a world in which only a few hold power and privilege (Roman & Baybado, 2008). Several current themes of CST describe the responsibilities of researchers engaged in critical research. For example, teachings on maintaining the dignity of life state that “people are more important than things, and that the measure of every institution is whether it threatens or enhances the life and dignity of the human person” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, n.d.). Another example is found within the call to care for family and community, which recognizes that “how we organize our society in economics and politics, in law and policy directly affects human dignity and the capacity of individuals to grow in community” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, n.d.). Both of these themes are supported through individual and Church work that preserve human rights and protect the poor and vulnerable, including children. They distinctly oblige Catholics to seek equity and justice in our world.

Critical theory and CST also focus on communalism. Critical theorists view reality, and the knowledge that reality produces, as politically, socially, and historically shaped (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Objective knowledge is exchanged for subjective modes of interpretation of events. That is, the stance critical theorists take is never neutral; it is always dependent upon the rela-

tionship among investigator, the participants, and the environment. Within this subjective view of reality, the researcher and the participants of research are constantly in dialogue, constructing meaning through dialectical interactions in which the values and backgrounds of each party are mediated among the research contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). There is a desire, then, to bring together the researcher with the researched, and to place a set of responsibilities on the shoulders of those conducting critical research to honor the experiences found. The researcher must also seek ways to retell and represent findings that are aligned with the purpose of achieving a sense of social justice, and within it overcoming aspects of inequality. These responsibilities are supported by the CST theme of working toward human solidarity, or the unity of the human community. Solidarity emphasizes cohesion and collaboration among all people regardless of “national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences” and requires that people seek peace by working for justice (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, n.d). Further, CST emphasizes the need for individuals to work in solidarity to resolve social issues and to take responsibility for one another’s well being. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994, 1997) states that “socio-economic problems can be resolved only with the help of all forms of solidarity: solidarity of the poor among themselves, between rich and poor, of workers among themselves, between employers and employees,” for example (p. 524). Hines (2001) described the justice that is achieved through solidarity as commutative justice: justice that regulates relationships between individuals.

In summary, research utilizing critical theory must attend to opportunities to reduce inequality. It also requires a sense of responsibility on the part of the researcher to join with the researched to inform and alter current situations. In the unification of the search for knowledge and truth in terms of God’s revelation of Himself through research and education, and the application of this knowledge in service to the human community (John Paul II, 1990), we find the integration of CST with critical research compatible. Moreover, critical theory is to be utilized as a map to aid the researcher in designing the work they do (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2002). Similarly, the themes of CST reveal a commitment to struggling with local injustices in one’s own community in ways that preserve human rights and protect the poor and vulnerable. This impartiality toward the most vulnerable among us aligns with the critical research mission to bring voice to those who have been silenced, and to pursue the critical “enlightenment” and “emancipation” discussed above. *Gaudium et Spes* (Pope Paul VI, 1965) also calls attention

to working for justice among the most vulnerable. The encyclical identifies that “differences appear tied to age, physical abilities, intellectual or moral aptitudes, the benefits derived from social commerce, and the distribution of wealth” (#24). Because these are not dispensed equally, some people must contribute more than others in order to achieve a society that is socially just.

### Study Design

We followed a critical ethnography design for the qualitative data reported in this article, which was part of the evaluation of the diocese’s after-school program. This approach is grounded in critical theory, and therefore is the most suitable methodological approach considering our theoretical framework (Carspecken, 1996). According to Carspecken (1996), critical theorists “share a concern with social theory and some of the basic issues it has struggled with since the nineteenth century,” including “the nature of social structure, power, culture, and human agency” (p. 3). The following research question guided our collection and analysis of the qualitative data: How do students, families, and staff experience the after-school program both positively and negatively?

### Sites

The after-school program we studied was located at seven urban Catholic schools. The program and schools themselves were directed by the diocese as part of an urban schools consortium. At four of the schools, nearly 90% of students were from non-White ethnic/racial backgrounds, and over two-thirds of the students at each of these schools qualified for the federal free and reduced-price meals/milk program. On state standardized assessments, these four schools had rarely achieved passing rates above the state average for the five academic years preceding this study. The other three schools had a majority population of White students (or were more equally represented by different racial/ethnic backgrounds of students) and similar or slightly lower percentages of students qualifying for the free and reduced-price meals/milk program. They had also achieved passing rates equal to or greater than the state average on the state standardized assessment multiple times in the five academic years preceding this study. See Table 1, below, for a summary of all seven schools that participated in the after-school program.

Table 1

*Achievement and Demographic Data by School*

School Name	Student Ethnicity (2008–2009)	Free-Reduced Lunch (2008–2009)	% Passing the State Standard- ized Test (School Year)
School A	60% White	52% Free	75.8* (08–09)
	2% Black	13% Reduced	81.8* (07–08)
	29% Hispanic	35% Paid	76.6* (06–07)
	8% Multiracial 1% Asian		84.2* (05–06)
School B	0% White	68% Free	45.5 (08–09)
	95% Black	10% Reduced	55.9 (07–08)
	0% Hispanic	22% Paid	54.8 (06–07)
	5% Multiracial 0% Asian		65.2 (05–06) 58.3 (04–05)
School C	64% White	72% Free	65.9 (08–09)
	11% Black	10% Reduced	79.6* (07–08)
	15% Hispanic	17% Paid	82.7* (06–07)
	10% Multiracial 0% Asian		72.0 (05–06) 65.0 (04–05)
School D	1% White	48% Free	53.3(08–09)
	96% Black	23% Reduced	52.2 (07–08)
	1% Hispanic	29% Paid	47.0 (06–07)
	1% Multiracial 0% Asian		40.9 (05–06) 62.5 (04–05)
School E	6% White	86% Free	55.0 (08–09)
	3% Black	6% Reduced	45.0 (07–08)
	88% Hispanic	7% Paid	55.0 (06–07)
	2% Multiracial 1% Asian		60.0 (05–06) 44.7 (04–05)
School F	43% White	30% Free	87.5* (08–09)
	39% Black	5% Reduced	86.4* (07–08)
	4% Hispanic	65% Paid	84.7* (06–07)
	14% Multiracial 0% Asian		71.9 (05–06) 59.8 (04–05)
School G	3% White	90% Free	53.3 (08–09)
	3% Black	8% Reduced	48.8 (07–08)
	92% Hispanic	3% Paid	38.9 (06–07)
	3% Multiracial 0% Asian		56.0 (05–06) 56.3 (04–05)

*Note.* \* Indicates state standardized test scores are above state average for that school year.



## Data Collection Methods

We collected qualitative data concerning program implementation and staff and students' experiential views. Data began with observations of the after-school program at each of the seven schools. Next, we conducted eight in-depth interviews with the seven site directors and the diocesan program director. Finally, we conducted focus group discussions with parents from each program site.

**Observations.** We conducted program observations over 35 weeks for a total of 10 to 11 observations at each site. Each observation lasted approximately two to three hours for approximately 200 hours of observation. We took copious notes while observing program delivery and participant interactions, and generated extensive field texts. These field texts represented a description of exactly what we observed along with a parallel interpretive summary of participant experiences within each component. At the end of each month, we reviewed the field texts to identify common themes.

For the first two months of the program, we followed a hands-off, eyes-on approach, and generally did not actively participate in the after-school program. During this time, we carefully observed the program multiple times without being intrusive. But during month three, we adopted a participant-observer approach (Creswell, 2007). A participant-observer follows a continuum from complete integration within the ethnographic paradigm to observer-as-participant only in certain aspects of the research (Atkinson & Hammersly, 1994). We began to assist students with homework, as needed. Additionally, we interacted informally with program participants. The openness with which we visited sites and took part in programming allowed us to comfortably move throughout the buildings on our own, help students with homework, comment on their creations in art class, and even play games with them during fitness time. Through these opportunities, we were also able to engage in dialogue concerning staff members' perceptions and to discuss ideas for the after-school program.

**Interviews and focus group discussions.** The framework we used for observations carried over to interviews and focus group discussions, and through our use of a semistructured set of questions, which allowed staff and parents to take the lead regarding what they wanted to discuss. We conducted interviews with the director at each site and the program director toward the end of our observations. These interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Sample prompts included, "What is going really well this year

in the after-school program?, How have students responded to the program?” and, “How have the students’ families supported the program?” We audio-recorded these interviews and transcribed them verbatim.

We also conducted focus group discussions with small groups of parents from every program site. Each discussion included between three and eight parents. We asked site directors to help us recruit parents to participate in discussions. This may have posed a problem in that site directors could have selected only the most positive or supportive parents to participate. However, we noticed that participating parents expressed both positive and negative perspectives about the program. In addition, several site directors told us directly that they had asked parents to participate who they knew would offer both positive and critical information because site directors wanted honest feedback for program improvement. At sites where Spanish was the native language of some or all of the parents, one of us served as translator. Each focus group discussion lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Sample prompts included, “What are your favorite parts of the program?, What parts of the program would you like to see changed?, Why does your child or children attend the program? and, What do you hope your child will get out of the program?” We audio-recorded these discussions, and transcribed them verbatim.

### Data Analysis

In addition to reading over data during the data collection process, once we collected all of our data, we read the observation notes and interview or focus group discussion transcripts independently. Then we applied codes representing the sentiment of each paragraph or data cluster and/or developed codes identifying patterns within the data. As a team, we met to discuss the relationships among the codes, to compare memos, and to combine similar codes and memos into broader patterns or themes. Next, we returned to the original data sources to identify representative examples from observations and quotations from interviews or focus group discussions. Finally, we conducted negative case analysis to check for inconsistencies across the data (Carspecken, 1996).

In addition, we employed several validity techniques, primarily triangulation through the multiple data sources, but additionally, we had the codes and conclusions reviewed by peers outside of the research team to make sure our conclusions were valid and unbiased. On occasion, we encountered

problems surrounding analysis and the “lack of agreement on the meaning of experiences” (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1996, p. 71). We felt strongly about sharing our written work with the after-school program director prior to finalizing our findings. These member checks (Creswell, 2007) carried over to site staff as well. We wanted to ensure that our interpretations were valid in the eyes of our research partners and did not overlook something significant. However, in some of these attempts to share our writing, a disagreement emerged surrounding the meaning of what we saw. Our definitions diverged from those held by site staff. Yet, because CST and critical theory called us to advocate for improved education for students in urban sites, we most often sided with our interpretations because, in one example, we had recommended improvements in programming for the low-achieving students attending the after-school program. Thus, some contradictions arose between achieving a completely horizontal research relationship and advocating for social justice for program participants. Yet, through discussions, sharing, and honoring one another’s perspective, we moved forward (alongside the after-school program leaders and staff) in the research reporting and in helping translate findings into program improvements.

## Findings

Two themes—both focusing on relationships—emerged during qualitative data collection and analysis procedures. The first theme, student interactions, describes the helpful ways that students engaged with each other during the after-school program, and also the way that students exhibited a need for greater behavior supports. The second theme, staff-student and staff-families interactions, explains how staff members connected with students in the after-school program, and their families and carers. The focus on relationships emerged as an explicit connection to care, solidarity, and community within the after-school program sites.

### Student Interactions

Students influenced each other to act in both positive and negative ways. Interactions were often formulated around family relationships and cultural background. For example, brothers and sisters helped each other when they attended programs at sites that mixed the grade levels. In addition, at sites with special populations, such as many children who were native Spanish speakers, Latino children of all ages often helped each other with homework

and other activities. Students, as a whole, also exhibited behaviors typical of children and adolescents, including participation in playful teasing of each other, as well as some fighting or arguing with each other. However, fighting was observed less often than were helping behaviors or playful teasing.

**Helping behaviors.** Students often helped each other. They helped with homework, and cooperated to accomplish tasks such as passing out snacks or picking up games, toys, and books. In addition, children exhibited helpful behaviors toward all others—not just those who were most like themselves. For example, although Spanish-speaking children often spoke Spanish to each other, they did not use language to exclude non-Spanish-speaking students. It was clear that the children were used to working together and supporting each other within the school environment. Parents also noticed these supportive behaviors. During a focus group discussion, a parent offered the following:

It is a real nice sense of family here. I really like that. I think these kids watch out for each other and I think that is important. I'm sure they have the usual problems but I think for the most part this is really a good place for children.

There were also several examples of students being affectionate toward each other. For example, one girl hugged several other students—both boys and girls—before she went home for the day. Another girl kissed a younger student on the forehead before she left with her parent. Other children held hands or sat closely as they talked or worked together. In a number of cases, these interactions were the effect of a close relationship, such as a sibling or cousin. One site director said in her interview that she has “seen some really sweet moments when older kids are showing real care for younger kids.” Another site director said, “They are kind to each other.” A third site director noted that it makes her proud to see the older kids at her site helping the younger kids with their homework and reading. She said:

It's just so neat to see even if it is like a first grader or a second grader wanting to read to a pre-schooler. They really enjoy that, and some of the older kids will help the younger kids, too. That makes you proud because they are in that helping role.

**Evidence of a need for greater behavior support.** Students were also observed influencing each other to engage in less positive behaviors, indicating a need for more supportive programming addressing students' relationships with one another. Most of these behaviors were merely disruptive. For example, students might shout out, act silly, or talk when they were supposed to be working. However, on rare occasions, students' unhelpful behaviors were unrestrained and resulted in dangerous or cruel behavior. For example, a group of boys started throwing pencils at each other when the staff member was helping another student. Another example included student dialogue. One boy asked, "What is español?" and a girl replied, "Spanish, you moron."

There were a few examples of physical fighting between students during the after-school program. For example, students pushed, kicked, and punched other students. Some of these fights resulted from a tendency to playfully tease or make fun of each other. In one such case, two cousins were joking with each other, but as the insults became more personal, the girls became more upset and eventually slapped each other. However, these behaviors were not observed often.

### **Staff-Student and Staff-Families Interactions**

Teachers, parents of former and current students, administrators, parishioners, social workers, classroom assistants, and high school volunteers staffed the after-school program. All of these individuals showed that they cared about students in some way. In addition, they built valuable relationships with families.

**Staff and student relationships.** Staff members worked positively with students and their families. Staff were very caring toward students. For example, they complimented students' work, asked how students were feeling, and encouraged students to try harder. Staff also had high expectations for students. As one site director explained:

What I want them to know is that we love and care for them. We are not going to allow them to be disrespectful and rude. We want to help them. We want the best for them and we want them to succeed in the future.

Parents indicated that they appreciate when expectations are clear and consistent. Although there were times when staff members were inconsistent with their enforcement of expectations, in most cases, staff addressed behav-

iors, had clear expectations, and followed through with consequences appropriate to the students' actions. For example, one site director reported that her staff communicates very effectively to parents about how their children are doing in the after-school program. She believed that such exchanges built trust between the staff and parents. Consistent expectations resulted in fewer instances of negative behaviors at most sites. A few staff members avoided situations requiring intervention and behavior corrections, which resulted in the recurrence of negative behaviors. For example, after observing that a group of boys sitting on the floor were distracting each other and not getting much homework done, a teacher asked them several times if they thought they should move to a table. The boys continually said they did not think they should. Because she gave them a choice rather than an instruction, they were allowed to continue to distract not only each other, but also the other students in the room.

**Staff and family interactions.** Many positive interactions occurred between staff and family members during the sign-out process. At most sites, communication between parents and staff was efficient, secure, and beneficial. For example, a site director said:

[Parents] know we know what is going on with the child, with homework. They know we know what is going on in the classroom. They know that we will have those children complete their homework. If there is anything extra that needs to be done, it will be. Many of the teachers tell us if they need some class work completed. Parents value that.

Another site director said that the after-school program provides a bridge between school and home, saying:

It connects the families with the school and that is what we want. We want to make sure they know what is going on here. We want to make sure they have good communications with the teachers also. Everything is done to help the students.

Parents expressed similar opinions; for example, one parent said:

They care and almost in some cases they even check after your child more than you do at times on certain parts of the school day. It's very much an extension of the school day and we are all in this together.

Conversely, a few site directors said that they did not think the after-school program served as a bridge between school and home. For example, one site director said, "Usually the parents just directly communicate with the teachers."

Interactions between the staff and families were personal and comfortable. For example, at several sites, parents often stayed for a few moments to talk to the staff members. One site director observed that parents "come in and they will sit and play for a while sometimes instead of just leaving right away. They will stay around and play a game." The students showed signs of preference and enjoyment while at the program, and family members expressed appreciation and friendship. During a focus group discussion, one parent said, "I really like the fact that they encourage our children to respect themselves and others. They have a genuine love to teach children." Another parent said, "I feel like it is my house or something. I feel comfortable."

### Discussion and Implications

The emphasis on interactions and relationships among students, staff, and families emerged as a strong finding during the larger evaluation we conducted of the after-school program. One of the goals for 21st CCLC programming included increasing family involvement in schools. Though this goal was left to individual programs to construct their own definition of involvement, we noticed that the diocesan after-school program made care for students and their families a priority. This article's focus on this finding connects to the broader application of CST to our research. We now discuss our findings as they connected to CST and critical research.

The relationships among children in the after-school program demonstrated an emphasis on a shared human condition, something that Roman and Baybado (2008) wrote about when discussing CST for the modern world. In the efforts of older children to care for younger children, we observed a strong sense of value for the "other" and the dignity of all people. Even when older children had opportunities to assert power over the young, they opted to challenge power dynamics by showing care and love more often than not. Those few moments when children were unkind served as evidence that there was still a need for guidance and training from the adults. Children needed not only to see care for others modeled by the adults around them, but also to be coached in how to steer the distribution of power toward more egalitarian and less oppressive interactions (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2003).

Staff and family members demonstrated caring for one another, and for the children. Their interactions modeled the CST that “people are more important than things” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, n.d.). Staff showed deep care for students as they complimented and encouraged them, and invited them to share their true selves. Family members noticed this dynamic, and chose to linger at the after-school program with their children and with staff in order to build relationships and to nurture connections. Thus, caring interactions that respected the dignity of all people established a more egalitarian environment within the after-school program.

As researchers, we benefited from the space created by program staff, students, and families because we, too, were invited to engage in dialogue as part of the community (Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Our conversations within this community allowed us to not only collect extensive data, but also “strive for institutional change” when appropriate (Roman & Baybado, 2008). For example, we were comfortable offering suggestions for how family members could be more deeply engaged in the design of the program, and ways that staff might benefit from further professional development. As Catholics, we experienced a renewal of spirit and purpose through our observation of CST in action within the after-school program. We experienced first-hand that individuals with ethical and moral motivations—despite their human failings—can, indeed, work toward creating just institutions (Pontifical Council, 2004).

What these findings mean for the work we do is to encourage researchers and educators to explore how CST and critical theory complement each other for the purpose of fostering social justice within Catholic schools. CST provides a common language and unified purpose for those working within Catholic schools. CST, as a theoretical framework, allowed us to focus on ensuring that all students had the ability to feel accepted and a part of their school communities. Moreover, the CST preferential option for the poor calls us to expend *more* resources on those schools with higher percentages of students that come from poor and low-income families, such as the schools in this study. It incites us to advocate for these students and their families, and in particular, pushes us to conduct our research in a critical manner that questions why inequalities in urban Catholic schools exist at all and to call attention to ways that the schools are directing students’ emotional or social needs.

Furthermore, because CST emphasizes that the human condition and “the capacity of individuals to grow in community” are directly influenced



by “law and policy” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, n.d.), we are drawn to research opportunities whose results might advance policy for the improvement of the lives of those with whom we conduct research. We find it important to highlight the connection between critical theory and CST within educational research because in schools we are increasingly facing situations that call for action, and CST offers us a framework to act. Some of these situations include urban schools characterized by increasing percentages of minority students, high teacher turnover, low quality buildings, and sanctions, which, through recent reversals of the *Brown* ruling, and enactments of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, will remain without recourse (Eckes, 2004; Kozol, 2005; Orfield, 2001). Catholic schools are often located in cities and close to urban public schools. We hope a framework like CST within the context of critical theory can motivate researchers and educators (perhaps in particular those with a Catholic faith background) in urban locations to reflect and to take action for social justice.

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