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Mission, Faith, and Values—A Study of 94 Voices from Rhode Island Catholic Secondary School Graduates

Thomas E. Keefe, Ed.D.[1]

Abstract: While the mission statements of Catholic schools place emphasis on faith formation, Catholic schools are more often identified with high-quality academics and less with the development of faith. A qualitative descriptive study was designed to understand how Rhode Island Catholic secondary school graduates described the influence of the Catholic educational mission on the formation of faith and personal life values. The results of the study indicate that the graduates of Catholic secondary schools in Rhode Island recognized the strength of the academic programs at the four identified Catholic secondary schools. Participants also profusely described the influence of the Catholic educational mission on the development of personal life values, but the results were less conclusive regarding graduates' perceptions of the faith formation experience. Graduates who described faith as a process and personal journey had a more positive attitude regarding the influence of the Catholic educational mission on faith formation. In contrast, those who described faith as the practice of religious ritual as well as obedience to the dogma of the Catholic Church, both positively and negatively, were less effusive regarding the Catholic educational mission.

Keywords: Catholic educational mission, faith formation, values, Shared Christian Praxis

While the mission statements of Catholic schools place emphasis on faith formation (Maney et al., 2017), Catholic schools are more often identified with high-quality academics and less with the development of faith (Fuller & Johnson, 2014). The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (2005) state that the Catholic educational mission includes faith formation and academic excellence; moreover, and notes that faith formation also

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includes service to the local and world communities (2017). As an essential mission of Catholic education is faith transmission (Spesia, 2016), a qualitative descriptive study was designed to understand how Rhode Island Catholic secondary school graduates described the influence of the Catholic educational mission on the formation of faith and personal life values.

Background of the Study

Prior studies have explored student understanding of the Catholic educational mission (Fuller & Johnson, 2014; Village & Francis, 2016). Martin (2016) studied enrolled students to explore whether faith formation results from Church teachings or other influences. Fuller & Johnson (2014) also studied enrolled students and concluded that "the academic success culture can sideline rigorous reflection on the relationship between the implicit and explicit dimensions and how collective and individual Catholic identities are articulated by the school community" (p. 115). While the authors also stated that faith formation is an ongoing dialogue, limited research extends that dialogue to include Catholic secondary school graduates.

It is also unclear if the Catholic educational mission has influenced Catholic school graduates' life choices and values. Village & Francis (2016) found that Catholic secondary schools affected the values of students in the United Kingdom. In the United States, however, there is limited research on the efficacy of values formation. The current study, therefore, explored graduates' descriptions of the dual mission of Catholic educational mission (i.e., faith and value formation).

Since Vatican II and the decrease in religious vocations in the United States, there have been questions regarding the Catholic identity of Catholic schools and stakeholder understanding of the Catholic educational mission (Leblanc, 2017). The Church has become more involved in civil rights since the Second Vatican Council (Sanders, 2015). Denig and Dosen (2009) explored the historical mission of Catholic schools and how the mission of Catholic schools has changed since Pope John XXIII's call to rejuvenate the Church and enhance Catholic teaching. The authors argue that the central elements of the Catholic educational mission became more identified with evangelization, community, holistic development, public worship, social justice, and service. However, the costs of Catholic school tuition and the success of alternative parish education programs have also complicated the understanding of the Catholic educational mission. Polka et al. (2016) argue that, as Catholic schools become increasingly dependent on higher tuition costs, students are more likely to represent socioeconomic populations that may not be sensitive to the counter-culture message of the Church and the Catholic educational mission. The authors show how, as Catholic secondary schools established strong reputations for academics and athletics, the faith formation aspect of the Catholic educational mission became overshadowed.

In addition to academic excellence, the Catholic educational mission is meant to provide catechesis in the Catholic faith. Catechesis is the process of faith transmission from parents,

clergy, and teachers to catechumens. With the growing number of lay administrators and teachers, increasing numbers of non-Catholic students, and the perceived need to market Catholic schools' academic success, Catholic schools must reexamine their Catholic identity (Schuttloffel, 2016) (Boyle et al., 2016). Understanding Catholic secondary school graduates' descriptions of the Catholic educational mission and personal faith formation may therefore benefit the process of rethinking the mission-based identity of Catholic schools.

Theoretical Foundations

Groome (1991) describes faith formation as a transcendent activity that "encourages people to interpret their lives, relate to others, and engage in the world that faithfully reflects what they perceive as ultimate in life ... particularly to how people experience and live their relationship with *the* [sic] Transcendent" (p. 11). Groome (1991) refers to catechumens as "agent-subjects-in-relationship" with others, God, and the world and located in a historical and social context (p. 134). That is, catechumens are on a journey of personal and spiritual growth.

Shared Christian Praxis is a five-step understanding of faith formation, which Groome calls religious education. For Groome (1991), Christian faith is the "formal" purpose of religious education, as it forms the catechumen (p. 18) and culminates in the fifth movement, Decision/Response for Lived Christian Faith. Groome describes "lived Christian faith" as "believing, trusting, and doing God's will" (p. 18). Praxis, Groome writes, is the practice of faith combined with critical reflection on that practice. The naming, reflection, relating, discussing, and decision aspects of religious formation are all part of an invitation to the journey of faith as outlined in Groome's five movements.;

Shared Christian Praxis is a pedagogical model "constructed with the purpose to facilitate a dynamic interaction between present-day action and the Christian Story/Vision so as to engender action authentic to Christian faith" and lived response (Clement, 2007). Both Martin (2016) and Suart (2007) used Groome's Shared Christian Praxis as the theoretical framework for their research but did not apply Groome (1980, 1991) to graduates' descriptions of faith formation. Since limited research has been conducted using Groome's Shared Christian Praxis to describe graduates' understanding of the faith formation of the Catholic school mission, the present study was grounded in Groome's fifth movement—Decision/Response for Live Christian Faith—as a theoretical framework.

Fowler's Stages of Faith (1981) helped ground the study and was a useful lens for data analysis. Fowler (1981) described faith as stages of understanding, applying Kohlberg's moral developmental stages to perceptions of religion: Fowler's six stages of faith reflect different cognitive and behavioral attitudes toward religion at different life stages. Both Groome and Fowler suggest a more personal and developmental process of faith and value formation than may

be conveyed via four years of academic coursework. As such, the researcher sought to explore graduates' understanding of faith and value formation and the influence of the Catholic educational mission.

Methodology

Using Shared Christian Praxis as the theoretical model, the researcher constructed a qualitative descriptive study to explore the individual voices of Catholic school graduates regarding their perceptions of the Catholic educational mission and its influence on the formation of faith and personal life values. Two research questions were developed to address the gaps in the literature noted by Fuller & Johnson (2014), Martin (2016), Suart (2007), and Village & Francis (2016):

Research Questions

R1: How do Catholic secondary school graduates describe the influence of the Catholic educational mission on the formation of faith?

R2: How do Catholic secondary school graduates describe the influence of the Catholic educational mission on the formation of personal life values?

Population

The study sample consisted of graduates of Rhode Island Catholic secondary schools, who had attended the school for all four years. The researcher posted an invitation to participate on Facebook and LinkedIn, comprising four questions for inclusion:

1. Did you attend Catholic school(s)?
2. How many years did you attend Catholic school?
3. What year did you graduate from Catholic secondary school?
4. What Catholic secondary school did you attend?

Respondents who met the inclusion criteria were then sent a survey via SurveyMonkey, which included five open-ended questions:

1. How would you describe the faith formation aspect of attending a Catholic secondary school?
2. Would you say those faith formation experiences were generally positive or negative?
3. If positive, how did those experiences influence you? If negative, how did those experiences influence you?
4. How are those experiences still influencing you today?
5. How would you describe whether your values align or do not align with Catholic values or the Catholic educational mission today?

There were 102 responses to the survey, and the average responses to the 5 questions were approximately 300 words from each respondent. The researcher excluded one respondent (N/A-1) because it became apparent that N/A-1 did not graduate from a Catholic secondary school, and seven other respondents were eliminated for significantly incomplete or incoherent responses. The remaining 94 respondents constituted the study sample. The participants and schools were assigned pseudonyms by year of graduation: The most recent graduate was designated participant "1" and the school of graduation for the most recent participant was "S1." The most recent graduate's pseudonym, therefore, was "S1-1."

The sample represented four of the eight Catholic secondary schools in Rhode Island. Although only one graduate from St. Catherine's and two graduates from St. Thomas completed the survey, their responses were included in the study. Although qualitative research is limited to the participants' lived experiences, the limited responses from St. Catherine and St. Thomas High Schools do not negate the validity of the participants' responses. Although the solicitation for participation was not limited to specific schools, that most of the responses came from St. John's and St. Elizabeth's High Schools was due to the Facebook and LinkedIn contacts of the researcher.

Of the 94 participants, 52 were female, and 42 were male. While personal demographics were not required as part of the survey, some participants did refer to race and sexual orientation in their responses. Two women and four men self-identified as African-American. One male self-identified as Native American, and two females self-identified as Asian-Americans. Two men and two women self-identified as gay and lesbian, respectively. Participants also self-identified as having non-Catholic religious affiliations: The sample included Christians, Buddhists, Episcopalians, Jews, and Unitarian Universalists, and some were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. All participants graduated prior to data collection, and most participants graduated between 2007 and 2014.

As each Catholic school has a unique interpretation of the Catholic educational mission, the researcher also collected the mission statements of the Catholic secondary schools listed by the graduates who participated in the study (Table 1).

Table 1

Mission statements of the Catholic secondary schools the participants attended

High School	Extracts from Mission Statements
St. Thomas High School (S1)	The mission statement of St. Thomas High School mentioned relationships, community, human development, spiritual growth, academics structured, Christian values, creativity, critical thinking, and social consciousness.
St. Joseph High School (S2)	The mission statement of St. Joseph's High School mentioned vibrancy, community, spirituality, academics, arts, and athletics.
St. John High School (S3)	The mission of St. John's High School mentioned rigor, college-preparatory curriculum, diversity, the needy, spirituality, morality, intellectual, emotional, and physical development, community, service, and academics.
St. Catherine High School (S4)	The mission statement of St. Catherine's High School mentions academics, social consciousness, faith, and innovative learning environment, empowerment.

The voluntary follow-up interviews with the subsample comprised the second source of data. While a subsample population of 12 was anticipated, only 11 agreed to the follow-up interview. The researcher then re-solicited, and another three participants agreed. The total subsample population consisted of 14 participants who graduated between 2003 and 2018. The purpose of these interviews was to ask the subsample questions regarding the Catholic Church's key doctrines, to: (a) better understand the formed faith of Rhode Island Catholic secondary school graduates and, (b) how the Catholic educational mission might have influenced their faith and values.

The questions asked in the interviews included the teachings on original sin, Immaculate Conception, Virgin Birth, christology, transubstantiation, the eucharist, the resurrection, heaven and hell, the second coming and apocalypse, and papal infallibility. In addition, the researcher asked about the Church's teachings regarding the sanctity of life, such as abortion, the death penalty, euthanasia, and war. The interview also covered the Catholic social teachings regarding marriage and family, homosexuality, divorce, remarriage and annulments, stewardship for creation, social justice, and preferential option for the poor. Finally, participants were asked about the Church's teachings regarding the tradition of celibacy and the doctrinal teaching of male-only ordination to the priesthood.

Data Collection and Analysis

To answer the two research questions, the researcher used thematic analysis—a systematic approach to examining data that involves identifying themes or patterns of cultural meaning, commonly called coding (Yin, 2010). Thematic analysis was useful in determining the themes and patterns in the survey and interview transcripts. In analyzing the data, the researcher was able to identify patterns and relationships and understand the phenomenon more deeply (Saldaña, 2015). This process was the most appropriate way to understand how Rhode Island Catholic secondary school graduates described the influence of the Catholic educational mission on the formation of faith and personal life values within the context of Groome's (1980, 1991) fifth movement—Decision/Response for Lived Christian Faith.

Survey Data Analysis

Before beginning data analysis, the researcher prepared the data: First, by transferring it into Google Documents and Google Sheets as a more efficient mode of organization. Next, the researcher edited the participants' responses as well as the raw interview transcripts to eliminate typographical errors. The researcher then created a codebook, as well as a table for each survey question. The tables included columns for the question, participant response, preliminary codes, and emergent categories. The researcher used these tables to organize and explore the data.

The researcher identified simple words and phrases based on the initial review of the data to create codes. After the data were coded, similar codes were combined, and the codes were

sorted into categories. For example, graduates described faith as performing Christian service and volunteering, as well as rituals like attending Mass, praying, singing church music, and reciting prayers. As both the performance of rituals and acts of service are a practice, the researcher combined the codes into the theme "faith as practice." This theme corresponded to the first research question, and helped the researcher explore how graduates described the influence of the Catholic educational mission on the formation of faith.

Similarly, the codes corresponding to personal life values were sorted into categories and organized in relation to the second research question (R2). For example, in the surveys, graduates described their Catholic educational experiences as having "made me who I am today," as well as having influenced their career choice. Other graduates explained how Catholic schools helped develop their work ethic, study skills, and professionalism. These descriptions reflected personal life values, such as personal skills and career–faith alignment, so the codes were combined into the theme of "values as personal characteristics," as opposed to "values as ideals." The researcher then outlined the codes and categories in a table according to the appropriate research question (Table 2).

Table 2

Alpha-numerical outline of themes organized by the research question.

1. Aspects of faith formation	2. Aspects of values formation
A. Faith as belief i. Theism ii. God has a plan iii. Faith as journey B. Faith as relationship i. Relationship with God ii. Community/relationship with others iii. Faith as journey C. Faith as obedience i. God has a plan ii. Faith as journey D. Faith as practice i. Religious ritual a. Necessary b. Not necessary c. Faith is more than ritual ii. Actvity/service E. Not-Catholic i. Non-practicing Catholic F. Negatve experience i. Felt judged ii. Perceived hypocrisy iii. Became not practicing G. Faith as knowledge of teachings	A. Values as ideals B. Values as personal characteristics i. Who I am today ii. Work ethic, professionalism, study C. Value of the Catholic educational mission i. Academic excellence, Faith Formation, and Service (CST, POftP) a. World Religion classes b. Open conversations c. Diversity i. Safe | people like me ii. Sheltered; no diversity iii. Critical-thinking skills ii. Better pedagogy iv. Caring teachers v. nostalgia vi. Cost of tuition a. Sacrifice by parents

Interview Data Analysis

In the second phase of the study, the graduates' understanding of the Catholic educational mission and its influence on faith formation and personal life values was explored more deeply through voluntary semi-structured interviews. Fourteen members of the sample agreed to participate in the interview, marking them as "available and willing" (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007a, p. 286) with the potential to "facilitate credible comparisons" (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007b, pp. 239–240) regarding interviewees' formation of faith and personal life values.

In the interviews, participants were asked to describe the formation of faith and personal life values within the context of the Catholic educational mission. The researcher asked follow-up questions to clarify answers to the interview questions. After the researcher completed the interview process, the transcripts were saved in a Google Document and organized in the Google Drive folder created for the study. The transcripts were then electronically shared with each individual member via Google Documents as a form of member-checking. The interviewees were asked to review the transcripts and confirm that the records accurately reflected their words; they submitted their feedback within a week of the interviews, which enhanced trustworthiness as the interviews were in participants' recent memory. The researcher replicated the process used to analyze the survey data in the analysis of the interview transcripts. The themes that emerged from the interviews paralleled the survey results; moreover, the interview data provided complementary and more profound descriptions regarding the participants' understanding of the Catholic educational mission. The researcher used both data sources to understand how Rhode Island Catholic secondary school graduates described the influence of the Catholic educational mission on the formation of faith (R1) and personal life values (R2).

Results

Descriptions of Faith Formation

Perceptions of Faith

One of the main themes that emerged centered on the graduates' perceptions of faith. The survey respondents and the interview participants all expressed similar understandings of faith formation: faith as relationship, faith as a journey, faith as community, faith as service, faith as obedience, and faith as practice, faith as alignment, faith as knowledge and wisdom, and faith as morality. These understandings are encompassed by Groome's (1991) description of faith formation as a transcendent activity that "encourages people to interpret their lives, relate to others, and engage in the world that faithfully reflects what they perceive as ultimate in life…particularly to how people experience and live their relationship with the [sic] Transcendent" (p. 11). Moreover, as shown below, the participants' perceptions of faith reflect Groome's claim that faith is about transcendence (God), ontology (self), and political activity (others).

Faith as Relationship, Journey, and Community. The participants described faith as having a relationship with God, bonding with others, engaging in the world through service, and working in faith-inspired careers. For example, S2-3 said:

> I want to be taught how to find God in my life and how to feel like I actually have a relationship with him. The teachers tell you what to do, not how to do it. They tell you about the stories of the relationships other people have had with God, but not how you personally can come to really feel close to God.

S2-7 shared:

> While attending a Catholic high school, I was provided the opportunities to go on mission trips, take part in the community, and in Peer Ministry. My Peer Ministry class developed my leadership qualities, allowed me to design retreats for schools in the community, and teachkids about their faith, enabling them to ask questions and share their own testimony.

This dovetails with Groome's (1991) above mentioned description of catechumens as "agent-subjects-in-relationship" with others, God, and the world (p. 134). Moreover, several participants described their faith formation experience as a journey. S2-51 said: "The goal of the Church is simple, though the journey is complex: guiding all people back to God's loving arms." Eight of the 14 interview participants positively described the Catholic educational mission as being part of a community of faith (S1-1, S2-15, S2-24, S2-51, S2-54, S3-1, S3-8, and S3-20). In particular, S2-1, S2-54, and S3-1 described the sense of community in Catholic schools with nostalgia. S3-1 considers St. John's High School to have been her second home. It is at this second home that "for four years, high schoolers spend the majority of their lives, from 7 AM until 3 PM, at school surrounded by teachers, friends, books, and lots of work." The importance of community and faith formation in relationship was clear in Groome (1991), as well, further supporting the use of Shared Christian Praxis as a model for understanding how graduates of Catholic secondary school perceive the faith formation aspect of the Catholic educational mission.

Faith as Service. Interestingly, the participants who described faith as a community and faith as a journey were more likely to describe Christian service as accompanying and working for justice in support of social and structural change. In the survey responses and interviews, the graduates who discussed Christian service often referred to experiences organized by Catholic secondary schools and inspired by the Catholic educational mission. For example, S2-24 said:

> Years of Catholic education had built service into my routine through scheduled Christmas food drives and mandated community service hours. Although this guidance seemed like an obligation at the time, it was a necessary reminder to live out my faith since I was not yet mature enough to initiate the service on my own. Coming to college, however, provided the opportunity to take my faith into the real world.

And S2-4 phrased it in this way:

> To me, the Catholic educational mission is based on the importance of service: not only to our neighbors and communities around the world, but to serve each other as individuals—loving, helping, and most importantly, accepting one another with the dignity that is deserved by all fellow human beings.

In addition to acts of mercy, S3-6 discussed acts of justice as service and emphatically declared:

> Promoting unionization, workers' rights, and human rights overall is consistent with teachings on the sanctity of life. Eliminating the influence of money on political life is consistent with driving the moneylenders from the temple!

Both Fowler (1981) and Groome (1980, 1991) explored the internal processes of faith formation, and how the catechumens perceive self, others, and God. The difference between the two scholars revolves around engagement. Groome's Decision/Response for Lived Christian Faith entails the choice to serve others, whereas Fowler (1981) did not discuss service to others as much as the internal processes of faith formation regarding the structures of religion. In Stage 6 , Fowler points out the "imperatives of absolute love and justice [sic] of which Stage 5 only hints at." Fowler adds that the self, at Stage 6, engages in "spending and being spent for the transformation of present reality in the direction of translucent actuality" (p. 200)—or, as Groome (1991) Groome (1991) would say, the *malkuth Yahweh, basileia tou theou,* or reign of God. Fowler (2000) called this "vocation":

> Vocation is the response a person makes with his or her whole self to the address of God and to the calling to partnership ... [involving] our leisure, our relationships, our work, our private life, our public life, and the resources we steward, so as to put it all at the disposal of God's purposes and the neighbor. (p. 77)

Faith as Obedience. Of the study participants who were raised Catholic, the emergent theme regarding R1 was that the formation of faith was understood to be the knowledge of and obedience to the Church's teachings. These graduates perceived faith similarly to Topping (2015). This perception can be inferred from the correlation between complete acceptance of Church teachings and Mass attendance of those self-identifying as Catholic, non-practicing Catholic, or non-Catholic, as illustrated in Table 3. However, while the graduates seemed to judge themselves according to Topping's standards of faith formation as an all-or-nothing, Bezzina et al. (1996) pointed out that "a careful reading of Groome's approach to praxis did not seem to us to assume faith on the part of students" and that Shared Christian Praxis is "an invitation to a deepening of faith, no matter what their starting point" (p. 18). That is, the graduates who described themselves as no longer having faith have still been formed in faith and indeed describe themselves as in the process of formation.

Table 3

Religious self-identification and Mass attendance

Graduate	Religious Self-Identification	Mass Attendance
S1-1	Catholic	Y
S2-8	Non-Practicing Catholic	Occassionally
S2-15	Catholic	Y
S2-21	Non-Practicing Catholic	N
S2-24	Catholic	Y
S2-51	Catholic	Y
S2-54	Non-Practicing Catholic	Occassionally
S3-1	Catholic	Y
S3-6	Not Catholic	N
S3-8	Catholic	Y
S3-11	Not Catholic	N
S3-20	Catholic	Y
S3-21	Not Catholic	N
S3-40	Not Catholic	N

Faith as Alignment. The emergent theme regarding R1 for those who identified as non-practicing Catholics and non-Catholics was their equation of Catholicity with a personal alignment of beliefs with Church teachings—a finding that has been shown in prior research (Manning, 2018). However, if faith formation is the accumulation of knowledge of Church teachings—and not only adherence to the teachings—then the Catholic educational mission was successful, as the participants had a strong grasp of Church teachings, whether or not it aligned with their personal beliefs.

Regarding adherence to Church teachings, the theme that emerged concerning R1 was that most participants did not completely agree with the teachings of the Catholic Church. While they did describe acceptance and adherence to Church teachings to a degree, the researcher also asked the interviewees to explicitly express their understanding of key elements of Catholic doctrinal teachings and tradition. These questions invited the participants to describe their specific beliefs, knowledge, and understanding of the Catholic faith. For example, both S3-1 and S2-51 described being formed in faith by the Catholic educational mission, but only 57% of S3-1's beliefs align with the Catholic faith, whereas S2-15's views align entirely with the Church. This more profound exploration of what faith is to each interview participant enriches our understanding of how the graduates described the influence of the Catholic educational mission on the formation of faith.

Faith as Knowledge and Wisdom. An emergent theme in the study regarding R1 was the pattern of literal interpretation by the Catholic interview participants, as well as their belief in the historical accuracy of the Bible. Several interview participants said that the Christian Scriptures

are inherently accurate (S1-1 made a similar justification for belief based upon the Gospel of John). This confusion of personal faith with a literary analysis of the Biblical text is present in responses by S2-15, as well. While this study was focused on how graduates described their faith formation experience, it also included a reflection on the efficacy of faith formation programming. It is possible that the curricula of St. John's High School (S1-1) and St. Joseph's High School (S2-15) do not emphasize the authorship of the New Testament as much as other elements of Church history.

In addition, some participants were more familiar with the Church teachings regarding miracles, abortion, and homosexuality than most other Church teachings. This pattern was present in responses from graduates of three of the four schools included in the study, which suggests that it was not just the social discourse of a particular school. It is unclear how consistently or comprehensively other Church teachings are covered in the curriculum. Of the Catholic social teachings, the preferential option for the poor, stewardship for creation, and just war theory seemed less understood than espoused miracles, abortion, and homosexuality. For example, while S2-15 said he agrees that war, in general, is immoral, he admitted: "I can't speak to Aquinas's just war theory because I have not read enough of it. The bits that I have read I cannot recall well, so I can't say if I agree that a just war is basically unattainable." If the Catholic educational mission is understood to be a didactic absorption of all Church teachings, then the current study would indicate that Topping (2015) is right to question the results of faith formation in Rhode Island Catholic secondary schools.

Similarly, S2-10 expressed the understanding that faith was a didactic experience ("the teachings and values of the Catholic faith were ingrained in me") and other participants expressed a similarly didactic understanding that "the goal of Catholic education is to give students the knowledge and faith foundation to understand how to seek God in this world" (S2-51). S2-15 and S2-51 were also more aligned with Topping's (2015) didactic understanding of faith formation, necessitating a predetermined endgame of total acceptance of Church teachings. Even among practicing Catholics in the study, the descriptions of their formed faith were diverse, as well. S1-1 and S3-8 were the third and fourth graduates most aligned to Church teachings but expressed an appreciation for learning and processing, not just accepting Church teachings at face value. There was also a lack of consensus among Catholic participants whether the Biblical texts should be interpreted literally or figuratively. While S1-1 and S3-8 seemed more compatible with the process-based understanding of faith formation and Groome's (1980, 1991) fifth movement than S2-15 and S2-51, all four seemed to equated Catholicity with acceptance of and adherence to Church teachings.

The self-identification of the survey and interview participants as Catholic, non-practicing Catholic, or non-Catholic was indicative of Mass attendance. The theme that emerged regarding Mass and R1 was that those who identified as Catholic also described regular Mass attendance. However, both S1-1 and S3-1 pointed out that Mass attendance ought to be willful, not obligatory.

These comments support the literature regarding rituals as tools to develop a relationship with God and others (Costanza, 2020).

Faith as Morality. Reflected in the participants' responses was an admiration for moral development, which relates to both R1 and R2. Even those who disagreed with Church teachings appreciated the moral education in the Catholic educational mission. While S2-15, S2-51, and S3-20 said homosexuality was morally wrong, most survey respondents and interviewees described either tension or hypocrisy regarding the juxtaposition of the Church's teaching on homosexuality with the Church's teaching regarding respect and dignity. While analyzing the data, the researcher noticed frequent criticism that juxtaposed the Church's teachings on respect and homosexuality. Regarding the moral education associated with the Catholic educational mission, S3-40 considered Catholic school a primary experience in his life. He said, "Even though the Church itself doesn't play a part in my life anymore, the lessons learned not only in an academic sense, but also the ethical, moral, and emphasis on critical thinking are lifelong takeaways that Catholic schools provide."

S2-15 pointed out personal responsibility in the faith formation aspect of the Catholic educational mission:

> Catholic education is not reform school. If one desires to immerse himself in the education and its mission, the mission was accomplished. On the other hand, those who attend the private education facilities strictly for better academics, less violence, or prestige will not walk away with all that Catholic schools have to offer. For me, Catholic education has allowed me to develop an increased understanding and appreciation for the Catholic faith.

Similarly, S2-39 mentioned the influence of parents while at the same time crediting Catholic schools:

> I do believe, however, that Catholic schooling alone is not enough for someone to grow in their faith. From being a child of two Irish-Catholic parents and having been attending churchweekly since I was very young, I think that my upbringing has played a big part in how I feel about the Church. I do want to end though, by saying that if you choose to send your childrento a Catholic school, that at least the opportunity is there for them. In the same way that a great history or math teacher can inspire a student to follow their interests and pursue that as a fieldof study, a great religion teacher can just as easily inspire a student to grow in their faith.

The suggestion that Catholic secondary schools offer an opportunity but do not bear sole responsibility fits with Groome's Shared Christian Praxis. Ultimately, however, the decision to return to the call to faith belongs to the catechumens. S2-51 added, "as a practicing Roman Catholic, I am thankful that I attended a Catholic middle school and high school. Although it was not the only factor playing into my faith formation, it did have a role as I have reflected upon it later in life."

Concerns Regarding Faith Formation

The theme that emerged regarding parish faith formation contrasted findings from prior research. Cieslak (2006) argued that faith formation in Catholic schools and parishes are not equal. Catholic school students have between 4.5 and 7.5 hours of religious education per week, whereas parish programs may have two hours of instructional time at best. Cieslak points out that this situation leads to either overwhelmingly arduous parish faith formation programs or the watering down of high school faith formation. However, three of the seven Catholics in the present study's sample discussed their parish as a positive source of faith formation, even in contrast to Catholic school.

S2-24 is also one of the two interview participants who suggested that parish religious formation programs are as good as Catholic schools in forming faith. When asked about the Immaculate Conception, S2-24 related "a great analogy" that she had learned—not from her Catholic secondary school education, but from her parish youth group while she was in high school. S2-15 cited material from his parish when he quoted Archbishop Sheen from religious literature that he acquired from his congregation, not his Catholic school experience. Echoing those experiences, S2-51 stated that parish programming and mission trips could form his daughter in faith as well as Catholic schools. In terms of the Catholic educational mission, most participants were concerned about the cost of tuition, and many others also expressed concern that social elitism, perceptions of sexism, and the lack of diversity were making the schools less "catholic" in the universal sense.

In the study, the major theme that emerged regarding R1 was the diverse understanding of what constitutes faith. For those who identified as Catholic, a theme that emerged was that the formation of faith was the understanding of and obedience to the Church's teachings. Even though only two graduates had completed alignment, the Catholics interviewees described themselves as Catholic because of their knowledge of Church teachings and Mass attendance. Among non-practicing Catholics and non-Catholics, the emergent theme indicated that the interview participants equated Catholicity strictly with the personal alignment of beliefs with Church teachings. However, if faith formation is the accumulation of knowledge of Church teachings, and not only adherence to the teachings, then the Catholic educational mission was successful, as the participants had a strong grasp of Church teachings, whether or not it aligned with their personal beliefs.

Descriptions of Value Formation

In describing the influence of the Catholic educational mission on the formation of personal life values (R2), the participants described personal life values as what they themselves felt was ultimately important in life. That is, there was a similar lack of consensus regarding how to define "values" as there was around what is meant by "faith." The themes that emerged included virtue values, personal characteristics, and the alignment of values to career. While Maney et al.

(2017) stated that one of the reasons parents send their children to Catholic schools for values formation, the researcher had expected those values to be more clearly identifiable as Catholic values. However, the results supported Baker (2019), who had identified compassion, dignity, hospitality, inclusiveness, integrity, respect, and stewardship as Catholic values. When discussing gospel values, Shields (2018) mentioned education (p. 84) and learning (p. 91), not indoctrination. As Shields (2018) said, "in normative discourse, values function as ideals or goals and bear a certain sense of obligation ... [but] positive growth in educational values rooted in faith requires, instead, a dialogue that can connect with the religious experience of all who wish to participate" (Shields, 2018, p. 86.).

As the survey and interview respondents described the Catholic educational mission, it was also abundantly clear that the mission was a value in and of itself. One of the most definite themes to have emerged regarding R2 was the appreciation for the academic excellence component of the Catholic educational mission. S3-6, a self-described atheist, chose to attend a Catholic university after attending St. John's High School because of his admiration for the Catholic intellectual tradition. S3-6 highly values Catholic education, a value pointed out by Shields (2018, p. 84)—specifically the commitment to logic and consistency. While the researcher had anticipated more uniquely Catholic values, the study still indicates that the Catholic educational mission influenced the graduates' values and was appreciated by the graduates.

While many graduates credited the Catholic schools for the development of values, S3-13 pointed out that values can become from other influences as well. He said, "I am now married, to a woman who did not go to Catholic school after elementary, and I can say that her [sic] and I share a lot of the same values and views." Parishes, ethnic heritage, and families were also acknowledged as sources of influence on the development of values.

Several students felt there was a disconnect between the Catholic educational mission and values and the cost of tuition at Rhode Island Catholic secondary schools. As S3-19 said:

> A Catholic education for our children is something we both dream of and strive for, but spend many hours debating and discussing the feasibility, especially in terms of cost. Something seems wrong about the rising cost, especially in terms of the Catholic educational mission and everything we've been taught from the Bible.

Moreover, a graduate of St. Joseph's shared this concern:

> I really think it's important for Catholic schools to reevaluate the ways that they generate income. It may not be as easy as reaching into the deep trench coat pockets of the Catholic Church, arguably one of the wealthiest institutions on our planet, but the solution may require some hard thought by the universal and local Church. If they believe that private Catholic

> school education should be for those that can afford it, then that is fine, but do not say publicly that a Catholic education is open to all if it's not.

While Saldaña (2015) points out that individuals and their values are shaped by each person's "specific biography and historic period of existence" (p. 135), Church leaders may want to explore alternative business models, and/or communicate how tuition costs do not undermine the Catholic educational mission.

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study is its advancement of understanding regarding graduates' perceptions of the Catholic educational mission. While there is research on how parents, students, and staff perceive Catholic education (Martin, 2016; Suart, 2007; Village & Francis, 2016), it is less clear how Catholic secondary school graduates describe faith formation using the Catholic educational mission. Previous researchers have applied Groome's Shared Christian Praxis model to better understand the faith formation process in both Catholic secondary schools and parish programs (Martin, 2016; Suart, 2007). However, limited research had been conducted to describe graduates' understanding of the faith formation aspect of the Catholic school mission. By integrating Groome (1980, 1991) and Fowler (1981) as the theoretical foundations of the study, the research has expanded the field of literature on Groome's Shared Christian Praxis as it relates to Catholic secondary school graduates' descriptions of faith formation and personal life values.

Implications

Study findings regarding how Catholic secondary school graduates describe the formation of faith and personal life values is theoretically, pedagogically, socially, and individually significant. These findings have theoretical and practical implications, as well. In general, these implications center around the lack of consensus around what constitutes faith and faith formation. The theoretical implication of this finding is that a common definition/understanding must be developed from the theological teachings of the Catholic Church and grounded in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (Church, 1997). Practically speaking, the results suggest that Rhode Island Catholic secondary schools may seek to better articulate the process and goals of faith formation within the context of the Catholic educational mission. The results also indicate that perhaps not all Catholic doctrines are emphasized equally in Rhode Island Catholic secondary schools' mission statements, schools, and classrooms. In particular, results suggest that graduates were less aware of the Catholic Social Teachings about the preferential option for the poor than other issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and divorce. Church leaders, both spiritual and academic, may consider expressly synthesizing the dialectical and didactic understandings of faith formation into a practical tool for Catholic schools. In professional practice, a statement on the pedagogical approach to faith

formation may allay misunderstandings by parents and students, as well as provide more focus and support to Catholic secondary school educators.

Recommendations

Study findings offer two concrete recommendations regarding the Catholic educational mission and the development of faith and personal life values. First, Rhode Island Catholic secondary school leaders should consider, collectively or individually, creating a foundational document including best practices, as also suggested by McGah (2019. Such a proposal could be the product of departmental, institutional, or diocesan workshops. Educators should discuss the *why* of religious education and not just the *how* and *what* of individual lesson plans.

Additionally, the tension between Topping (2015) and Groome (1980, 1991) must be addressed. Rhode Island Catholic secondary schools or the Diocese of Providence may consider a standard Shared Christian Praxis curriculum as the Australian Diocese of Parramatta. Inspired by Shared Christian Praxis, educators should design a pedagogy for faith formation that "is not [intended] to force the religion upon the student, but rather to use it as a guiding light in order to invoke a response to the material being covered in the classes" (S2-9). The study's findings suggest that Rhode Island Catholic secondary school students and graduates would benefit from a clearer understanding of the pedagogical process and goals of faith formation. This guiding document should include a common vocabulary regarding faith and inclusively describe faith as knowledge, faith as belief, faith as obedience, faith as the practice of religious ritual, and faith as the practice of serving others.

Limitations

Participation in the study was limited to those Catholic secondary school graduates with access to social media, so the results may include an age bias in the collected data which may have impacted the results. Moreover, Anderson and Perrin (2019) pointed out that 49% of LinkedIn users earn more than $75,000, 51% are college-educated, and 65% are under the age of 50. It is also possible that the respondents had disproportionately positive or negative experiences in Catholic schools and were thus willing to participate in the study more than the typical Catholic school graduate; this would limit the results in terms of participation bias.

Future Research

Future research could explore the difference between diocesan Catholic secondary schools and Catholic secondary schools affiliated with the charism of a religious order. Approximately half of the sample attended a Rhode Island Catholic secondary school affiliated with a religious order, and the other half attended a diocesan secondary school. It may benefit the literature to explore

whether graduates of Rhode Island Catholic secondary schools that identify with a charism of a religious order are more or less likely to understand and accept the Catholic Social Teachings and the preferential option for the poor, or other traditional and doctrinal Church teachings. The expansion of the literature would benefit Catholic educational leaders in determining how to open, reorganize, or operate new Catholic secondary schools.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the graduates of four Catholic secondary schools in Rhode Island recognized the strength of the academic programs at all four schools. Although there was no universal consensus regarding what constitutes a value, the participants provided rich descriptions of the influence of the Catholic educational mission on the development of their personal life values. Study results indicate that Rhode Island Catholic secondary school graduates value community, whether in religious rituals or Christian service. While the study results were less conclusive regarding graduates' perceptions of the faith formation experience, results indicate that, regardless of affiliation or agreement, graduates have strong knowledge of Church teachings.

The graduates' descriptions of the faith formation aspect of the Catholic educational mission included a variety of different understandings of faith formation. Graduates who described faith as a process and the personal journey had a more positive attitude regarding the influence of the Catholic educational mission on faith formation. The participants who were less effusive toward the faith formation aspect of the Catholic educational mission described faith as the practice of religious ritual as well as obedience to Church leaders and the teachings of the Catholic Church. The mixed results regarding graduates' perceptions of the faith formation experience suggest that the process of faith formation and the various aspects of faith are not universally understood.

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