

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: CATHOLIC SCHOOL IDENTITY: THE PURPOSE, MISSION, AND PRACTICE OF EDUCATION IN THE CATHOLIC TRADITION

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In this dissertation, I use Alasdair MacIntyre's (1981, 1987) theory of practice to better understand the identity of Catholic schools. The first chapter is a philosophical discussion of the relationship between identity and the purposes of school. The second chapter defines Catholic school identity in the context of the school as an organization and institution. And the third, fourth, and fifth chapters describe an empirical study I conducted on one Catholic elementary school with a particularly strong Catholic identity.

Researchers such as Coleman (1966) and Bryk (1993) have studied Catholic schools for decades, often in an attempt to understand the "Catholic school effect," in which students in Catholic schools outperform public school students on academic measures. These research programs necessarily assume a secular purpose of education, which Labaree (1997) described as social mobility, social efficiency, and democratic equality. In contrast, the Catholic tradition defines beatitude as the purpose of education. Beatitude is the internal joy that derives from virtuous living according to natural law. An education centered on

beatitude may succeed according to secular academic metrics, but academic success is not the purpose of such a school. Researchers who attempt to understand Catholic schools through a secular lens necessarily misunderstand them.

Organizational identity is a claim about what is central, distinct, and enduring for an organization (Albert & Whetten, 1983). So Catholic school identity must be a claim for what is shared between Catholic schools, different from other schools, and consistent over time. Catholic school identity is rooted both in a particular *Imago Dei* anthropology (Groome, 1996) and also in the particular symbols and rituals of Catholicism (Convey, 2012). Organizations with strong identities elicit internal goods, the particular satisfactions of practice, in contrast to necessary but morally neutral external goods such as money, prestige, and power. Principals of Catholic schools must balance the legitimacy schools need for external goods with the internal goods that derive from strong organizational identity.

These ideas inform and define the concept of Catholic school identity, but the lived reality of a school attempting to create and maintain its identity is full of practical complexities. To study how these complexities affect Catholic identity, I selected a Catholic elementary school with a reputation for a strong identity. I then interviewed administrators, teachers, and parents in the school community to assess their perceptions of how and why the school creates and maintains its identity. Because identity is created by the perceptions of stakeholders, these interviews gave significant insight into the nature of Catholic identity at this school.

After understanding identity through the perspective of these administrators, teachers, and parents, I claim the following: First, the primary way the school distinguishes itself, and therefore defines its identity, is by using a classical curriculum. Second, contrary to the expectations in the literature, the school has flourished as a result of its pursuit of strong Catholic identity. And third, because the school's success relies not only on distinctions from non-Catholic schools, but from other Catholic schools as well, the very strength of this school's identity simultaneously undermines claims to a universal nature of Catholic schooling. I believe these conclusions will have significant theoretical value to researchers of Catholic schools, and practical value to Catholic school principals.

CATHOLIC SCHOOL IDENTITY:

THE PURPOSE, MISSION, AND PRACTICE OF EDUCATION IN THE CATHOLIC TRADITION

by

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DEDICATION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: RATIONALE	1
“Towards an Authentic Understanding of Catholic School Identity” As published in <i>Educational Theory</i> , 2024	
Academic Achievement in Catholic Schools	2
The Purposes of School	5
Schooling in the Theory of Practice	9
Rationality and Justice Within a Tradition	12
Thomism and the Catholic Tradition	16
Assessing Policy Within Traditions	20
Catholic School Identity from a Thomist Perspective	25
Conclusions	29
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	31
“Institutionalizing Internal Goods through Catholic School Identity” As published in the <i>Journal of Religious Education</i> , 2024	
Two Frameworks for Catholic School Identity	33
Excellent Education and Internal Goods	40
Constructing Identity in Organizations	48
The Balance Between Identity and Survival	55
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	60
Conceptual Framework	62
Research Questions	65
Methodology	67
Site and Participant Selection	70
Data Collection	76
Data Analysis	80
Validity	83
Limitations	85
Significance	87

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS	88
Community and Connection	89
Building an Intentional Community	89
Must Teachers be Catholic to be Excellent?	95
School Facilitates Interpersonal Connections	100
School's Purpose as Service to the Community	105
Marketing and Attracting Students	111
The Classical Curriculum	119
Classical Curriculum as a Connected Whole	120
Entire Curriculum Pointed to the Mission	132
Classical Curriculum as Renaissance	137
Other Schools Learning from Sacred Heart	140
Challenges in Maintaining Identity	145
Mediating Disciplinary Expectations	145
Tensions Between Families and the School	149
Non-Catholic and Small Families Feeling Excluded	155
Concerns with Diversity and Inclusion	160
Religious Aspects of Catholic School Identity	170
Identity as Adherence to the Church	171
Prayer as Practice of Identity	177
Catholic Identity through Anthropology	186
The School as Institution	191
Principal's Leadership	192
Subsidiarity	196
Financial Restrictions	202
Conclusion	206

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS	208
Research Question 1	209
The Classical Curriculum and Narrative Identity	211
Anthropology and Practice	215
Community and Culture	220
Research Question 2	224
Intentional Community	225
Legitimacy	227
Renaissance Narrative as Policy Motivation	229
Research Question 3	233
Internal and External Goods	234
Catholic Schools or Catholic Schooling?	236
Thresholds of Diversity	239
Conclusions	243
The Classical Curriculum	244
Identity and Institutional Health	247
Catholic Schools and Catholic Schooling	248
APPENDICES	251
Appendix A: Positionality Statement	251
Appendix B: Consent Form	253
Appendix C: Recruitment Letter	255
Appendix D: Sacred Heart Vision Statement	256
Appendix E: Schedule of Interviews	258
Appendix F: Interview Protocols	259
REFERENCES	289

CHAPTER 1: RATIONALE

TOWARDS AN AUTHENTIC UNDERSTANDING OF CATHOLIC SCHOOL IDENTITY

Scholarship on Catholic schools often understands Catholic school identity as a means for the school to achieve some greater end, such as elevating students' academic achievement, promoting students' ability to enter the workforce, or encouraging students to participate in the democratic process. But the Catholic tradition itself pursues an end that it claims is greater still: beatitude, a particular conception of human flourishing. In this paper, I argue that researchers, policy makers, and practitioners can only fully understand Catholic school identity from an authentically Catholic perspective.

Authentic identity comes from the practice of a tradition. Communities of practice define a moral standard that is objective to the individual practitioner, who develops virtues through the pursuit of excellence. But these virtues, and the standards they help practitioners pursue, only make sense in light of a broader tradition. In the same way, claims of purpose operate within traditions, and assessments of these claims are incoherent when approached from an outside perspective. To understand Catholic school identity, then, one must view the school as a community of practice, rooted in tradition and oriented toward particular internal goods, rather than as an institution, focused on external goods that are applicable outside of its moral context. Below, I describe two prominent approaches to Catholic school identity, both of which imply that academic achievement, dropout prevention, student citizenship, and other such goals are the primary purpose of Catholic education. Because they do not claim beatitude as their ultimate purpose,

however, these secular interpretations are inconsistent with authentic Catholic school identity.

While Catholic schools offer a clear illustration of this point, they are hardly the only schools that derive identity from tradition. The same is true for any community of purpose, and applies to a growing number of private, charter, magnet, and community schools. To craft policy for these schools or to gauge their effectiveness always presupposes particular purposes and values, which in turn derive from traditional moral frameworks. By attending to authentic identity, future research and policy can more closely align with the purposes schools themselves claim to pursue.

Academic Achievement in Catholic Schools

As part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, the Johnson administration tasked sociologist James Coleman with studying inequalities in American schooling. In the resulting report and subsequent studies, Coleman found that Catholic schools were more effective than other types of schools at raising student achievement, relative to the student's socioeconomic status (Coleman, 1966; Coleman, Hoffer & Kilgore, 1982; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). Though Coleman's methods and conclusions were immediately controversial and drew significant criticism from both educators (Ravitch, 1981; Towers, 1992) and researchers (Cain & Watts, 1970; Kim & Frees, 2006), his work initiated broad study of the effects Catholic education might have on key educational outputs.

Coleman saw Catholic schools of 1960s America as extensions of the parish, rather than as agents of either society in general or of the individual students' families. At that time, typical Catholic parishes were defined both by the geography of ethnically segregated neighborhoods and by commonly shared norms, expectations, and beliefs. Coleman identified these parishes as examples of "functional communities" (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987, p. 7). Because members shared both physical space and a common moral language, adults in the community felt empowered to enforce shared norms; thus, children could expect that both teachers and parents would generally hold them to the same expectations. Coleman described this sort of congruence as "closure," which he claimed was essential for a community to create social capital, allowing schools to raise achievement by demanding more effort from students (p. 222).

Coleman's perspective on Catholic school identity depended on the geographic, social, and religious closure of the parish around the school, but by the time Anthony Bryk studied Catholic schools 30 years later, these patterns of closure had begun to fray. Students at the schools Bryk studied were less likely to live near the school, and were less likely to be Catholic than Coleman's students (Bryk, Lee & Holland, 1993). Despite these demographic shifts, Bryk still found that students in Catholic schools achieved at higher levels than their peers, that Catholic schools exhibited smaller achievement gaps across racial and socioeconomic lines, and that all-girls Catholic schools in particular were effective in protecting students from negative gendered stereotypes. These results seemed to suggest that Catholic school success was not entirely attributable to closed functional communities.

Instead, Bryk identified school culture, rather than the school's relationship with the neighborhood, as the primary driver of student achievement. Like Coleman, however, Bryk found that a strong school culture required unity, both of purpose and of means, embodied in practices common to all students. Schools with a strong culture maintain a high level of academic rigor for all students, for instance, by minimizing academic tracking. Common rituals encourage students to understand the school as a unit, and a clear school mission exposes "a broad, diverse cross section of students to a distinctive vision of active participation in humane society" (p. 11). Because the Catholic schools that Bryk studied taught a diverse population and provided these students common experiences that encouraged them to see the school as a community, they effectively pursued the "common school ideal."

Both Coleman and Bryk believed that there was some element of Catholic school identity that made these schools more likely to succeed. Though these two theorists conducted their studies in significantly different educational and social contexts, they each determined that identity requires some sense of unity among stakeholders and some sense of mission or purpose. But the differences between their views are as illuminating as their similarities. Coleman believed that unity came first, that the closure of a Catholic parish and neighborhood created the conditions the school could leverage for the development of social capital. Bryk believed that mission came first, that in the foundations of Catholic teaching is a purpose whose clarity provided both the means and the motivation for the school's cultural unity.

These mechanisms - unity and mission, social capital and school culture - connected Coleman and Bryk's conceptions of Catholic school identity and what they believed to be the purposes of school. For Coleman, schools were effective if they could "free the child from the constraints imposed by accident of birth" (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987, p. xxvi). Bryk considered schools to be effective if they encouraged "the full development of all students, both their minds and their hearts, [which] is education for democracy and advances the common good" (Bryk, Lee & Holland, 1993, p. xii). These goals animate many types of school, not only Catholic schools; indeed, both Coleman and Bryk sought not to understand Catholic school identity in isolation, but rather to extrapolate the means of Catholic schooling to a broader population. But in their attempt to derive from Catholic schools lessons other schools could follow, these theorists necessarily viewed Catholic schools through a secular lens.

The Purposes of School

Different theorists approach educational policy research in different ways, not only because they may prefer different methodologies or see value in different contexts, but also because they have different conceptions of the fundamental purpose of school. Beneath all policy and research are moral assumptions about desirable outcomes and their justifications. For instance, Coleman and Bryk both believed that academic achievement was the mark of effective schooling. It is significant, however, that they disagreed as to why it is good, and that neither reason fully aligned with those of Catholic schools themselves. A brief historical analysis of the purposes of schooling explains why.

David Labaree (1997) takes issue with public school critics who diagnose the “problems” with public schooling as either pedagogical (poor teachers and curricula), organizational (too tight or too loose governance), social (overcoming poverty and discrimination), or cultural (lack of “family values” and prominence of pop culture). Instead, Labaree argues that “the central problems with American education are fundamentally political” because these issues are consequences of competing goals. Labaree distills the goals of public education into three categories: democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility. These goals each seem valid from the perspective of the citizen, taxpayer, and consumer, respectively, but they are incommensurate, so they have recurred in political debates throughout history.

Widespread public schooling began, at least in the Northern and Western United States, as a project to train a citizenry for the rigors of 19th century democracy. Education existed prior to common school reforms, but earlier schools often broke along socioeconomic lines, with venture schools and academies serving middle class children and charity schools serving the children of the new urban working class (Kaestle, 1983). In contrast, the common school reform movement saw schooling as a public good, a mechanism to create a common culture of pan-Protestant, republican citizenship. Labaree identifies this robust tradition of state power and social leveling as democratic equality, in which public institutions seek to unite the citizenry.

From the social efficiency perspective, taxpayers still see schooling as a public good, but less as a mechanism to create citizens. Instead, they understand school as a sorting agent to optimize skill distribution in the market. Advocates of this goal argue that “our

economic well-being depends on our ability to prepare the young to carry out useful economic roles with competence” (Labaree, 1997, p. 42). Similar to democratic equality, the efficiency perspective limits individual choice, but instead of requiring the kind of broad, liberal learning expected of politically active citizens, this perspective values targeted, applied learning that ensures schools prepare workers for a highly stratified society. Achieving these goals makes public schooling a sound investment for taxpayers who see school primarily as preparation for the workplace.

Though advocates of both democratic equality and social efficiency regard schooling as a public good, and thus sometimes require students to learn in ways that they may not individually choose, the social mobility perspective centers the student herself. School systems that promote social mobility see education as “a commodity, the only purpose of which is to provide individual students with a competitive advantage in the struggle for desirable social positions” (Labaree, 1997, p. 42). The key feature of this kind of school is educational distinction, often in the form of credentials students use to signal achievement. Advocates of social mobility argue that schools should provide an even playing field to allow students with limited means to elevate their status through hard work; that is, they pursue an idealized meritocracy. But the credentialized signal can eventually become more important to the student than the learning the signal intends to communicate (p. 56).

Not all theorists share Labaree’s pessimism about the social mobility perspective or about education as a private good. As I described above, Coleman saw the primary benefit of Catholic schools situated in parish communities as an increase in social mobility; he believed that it was the very “publicness” of the closed functional community that created

the conditions for individual student achievement. In the two decades since Labaree's paper, several forms of school - public, charter, and private - have intentionally built school communities of various types and fostered distinct school identities (Strike, 2010; Berner, 2017). But many of these schools have described their purpose not as a service to the community per se, but rather as a particularly effective way of raising test scores, graduation rates, or other more complex metrics of private success (Schneider, 2017). The key concept that unites these conceptions of social mobility is the belief that students respond well, both in their commitment to common purpose and in their individual ambitions, when participating in a healthy, consistent group. But even these theorists consider community to be simply a means, rather than the ultimate purpose of the school.

Labaree's analysis demonstrates the deep connection between the purpose of schooling and the development of school identities, and even the more optimistic theorists would agree that a school that pursued social mobility through stratification and direct competition for scarce honors would be a school with a weak collective identity. Such a school would not be able to understand itself as a unified group, but rather as a service for a collection of individuals, much like a market that is public in access but private in purpose (Starr, 1988). Such a school allows each individual student to define his own purpose, his own goal, his own criteria for successful schooling. In contrast, I describe below a theory of practice in which the purposes of schooling are defined collectively but objectively by the group of practitioners themselves. Schools that understand themselves in this way are more likely to have shared values, and therefore strong school identity.

Schooling in the Theory of Practice

Labaree's framework allows us to interpret Coleman and Bryk's work through the reciprocal interaction between unity and mission. In the theory of practice described by Alasdair MacIntyre, it is common purpose that distinguishes the *practice* of schooling from the *institution* of the school (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 194-195). MacIntyre argues that practices accomplish their purposes by inculcating virtues and distributing intrinsic rewards that students cannot accumulate at institutions as such. Finally, MacIntyre shows how these virtues gain meaning insofar as they cause students to understand their lives as *narratives*, and that these narratives are necessarily intertwined with *tradition*. Catholicism is only one of several traditions that can grant meaning to personal narrative and thereby ground the virtues of practice - others include Protestantism, secular liberalism, and Marxism - but it creates school identity precisely because it is a historically rooted tradition that provides students with coherent, teleological answers to important and difficult questions.

MacIntyre has denied that education itself is a practice, but I agree with Joseph Dunne that it is because education is complex, social, and moral in nature (MacIntyre & Dunne, 2002). MacIntyre's argument is that education is a tool used by all practitioners in order to recruit and train the next generation; in this conception, math teachers are participating in the practice of mathematics, not the practice of schooling (Murphy, 2013; McLaughlin, 2003). But particularly in K-12 schooling, teaching mathematics is more closely related to teaching history than to practicing mathematics; teaching itself has hard-earned skill sets and socially defined standards of excellence independent of those of the subject. The excellence of teaching is an excellence of human judgment, and recent

scholarship has argued that the practice of education relies on these human judgments as a necessary bulwark against a growing push for instrumentalism, such as justifications for education in terms of social efficiency (Higgins, 2011; Stolz, 2016).

If education is a practice, then teaching cannot consist entirely of a collection of pedagogical competencies (Fitzmaurice, 2010). Instead, the practice of education must connect the teacher, the subject matter, and the student into a coherent community. Universities and other sites of higher education often exacerbate the divide that practice-oriented education can bridge by separating “research” faculty from “teaching” faculty; indeed many research-oriented professors participate in the practice of their field (rather than the practice of education), and teach as a means for apprenticing novices into the field (Murphy, 2013). But because K-12 education is rarely divided in this way, and because most teachers in these schools do not consider themselves to be practicing mathematicians or practicing historians, I claim not only that school-based education is a practice in a MacIntyrean sense, but also that the school is the primary social space in which education is practiced.

Practices orient participants towards virtue by extolling internal goods and demanding excellence. Consider, for example, an elite teacher with deep mastery of material and effortless command of the classroom. This teacher meets with the new hires in August and tells story after story with an obvious sense of satisfaction and contentment. The new teachers want nothing more than to emulate him in their own classrooms, but when they try his techniques, they fall short. Precisely then, the veteran teacher reminds

these novices that he earned his stories through years of diligence, reflection, humility, and courage. To earn the joy they desire, they must first acquire virtue, through practice.

This story does not describe every school, but it does exemplify the practice of education, with a socially defined goal that is objective to the practitioner and that requires excellence to obtain. Note that not only teachers but students and families can also be practitioners of education, participating in the complex, social, and moral activity of classroom learning with the common purpose of satisfaction at a lesson well taught and well learned, of human flourishing as defined in the social space of school. Common purpose is therefore what distinguishes the practice of education from the institution of school. Without common purpose, individual teachers, students, and families can of course feel satisfaction at a job well done. But they necessarily must be defining what that means for themselves, subjectively. Instead, practices call the individual practitioner to participate in a larger tradition.

One of MacIntyre's central theses is that by fully participating in a tradition, schools can help create an "educated public" within which real, meaningful debate can flourish (MacIntyre, 1987). If participants in an educated public share standards of rationality, *i.e.* a sense of what counts as sufficient evidence to defend a claim, then diverse viewpoints within a tradition can disagree and make sense of their disagreement. However, modern universities typically recruit and elevate many diverse traditions, each with their own standards of rationality (Vokey, 2003). As a result, meaningful debate cannot occur and attempts at rational exchange devolve into assertions of power and coercion. To prevent this fate, MacIntyre argues that students who participate in distinct traditions ought to be

educated separately, allowing them to develop habits of debate and rationality that can only occur within shared norms, before using these habits as tools for understanding and interacting with a diverse world. This particular point has come in for predictable criticism within the MacIntyre scholarship, as intellectual diversity remains an important bulwark against devolution into unhealthy solipsism (MacAllister, 2016).

Clearly MacIntyre understands that sharing a common tradition is not enough to ensure that the community is healthy and just, so he further stipulates that virtue must contribute to the narrative conception of human lives, and must situate those narratives within historically-rooted traditions. Narratives require integrity, a holistic sense of self that extrapolates the moral excellences learned in practice onto other situations. For example, a truly honest teacher must also be an honest father and friend. These narratives grant intelligibility to our actions by centering intention. Ask a teacher what she is doing, and she might answer either “assigning homework problems,” or “preparing students to succeed in collegiate math,” or “sharing the unique joys of mathematical creativity.” Determining which of these is the “correct” answer is precisely the role of the practice, which draws individual practitioners’ intentions towards a common purpose. The practice attracts these narratives to this particular common purpose because it uses a moral framework that is called tradition.

Rationality and Justice Within a Tradition

A tradition is a coherent collection of narratives that a community tells itself about itself. Traditions therefore provide communities with a shared language that creates unity

and purpose, but MacIntyre argues that they serve another, more fundamental role: to grant meaning to questions of truth and justice (MacIntyre, 1988). Stories have characters who make decisions and face consequences for those decisions; whether those decisions were right or wrong, whether those consequences were desirable or not is entirely up to the story. MacIntyre argues that when a community agrees on a set of shared stories that coherently define these kinds of moral claims, the set of stories becomes a tradition. This tradition then sets the basic foundational definitions for justice and rationality, such that any argument about what is true and what is good occurs within, not between traditions.

This interpretation of traditions controversially defines modern liberalism as a tradition, despite its adherents often describing their thought as anti-traditional or neutral on questions of justice and rationality. Prominent liberal thinker Stephen Macedo (2000) claims that debate on such questions must begin with certain shared first principles, such as freedom of conscience and the scientific method. Though Macedo's ground rules seem reasonable or even neutral at first, two problems arise. First, these first principles exclude all forms of knowledge that cannot be understood scientifically, particularly those produced through revelation and faith. And second, these principles themselves have a long history, which undermines their claims to neutrality. Hence, by MacIntyre's lights, Macedo's liberalism is itself a tradition (MacIntyre, 1988).

MacIntyre describes four considerations that he claims are essential to understand the nature of traditions and traditional moral inquiry. First, rational justification is essentially historical. "What justifies the first principles themselves... is the rational superiority of that particular structure to all previous attempts within that particular

tradition” (p. 8). He goes on to claim that even a successful argument for the rationality of one set of first principles over another only convinces those within the same tradition. So Christians can have an argument over whether scientific evidence of evolution contradicts or confirms the Genesis creation narrative, but secular liberals cannot because that is not an argument within their tradition. The resolution of this argument will then update the tradition’s first principles; indeed their different answers on this question helps distinguish Catholic and Evangelical epistemologies.

Because there are diverse, historically rooted understandings of rationality, there must also be diverse theories of justice; arguing about what is true is deeply related to arguing about what is good. Catholics might subscribe to the Thomistic theories of virtue, while the moral framework of the Enlightenment has led to multiple coherent theories of justice, such as Kant’s categorical imperative, Mill’s principle of utility, and Nietzsche’s primacy of the will. Each of these theories are at the root of a different tradition that tells stories in order to understand the consequences of its own first principles. When contradictions inevitably arise, as they do for any theory of justice, the tradition uses these stories to argue within itself. If the resulting updated theory is more internally consistent and coherent, then the tradition is strengthened, but if not, the tradition may split or fade.

MacIntyre’s third consideration is that traditions are incommensurate; that is, if each tradition holds its own rationality and its own theory of justice, then productive moral argument between traditions is impossible (Stolz, 2016). Irresolvable debate is exactly what caused Macedo most concern, as he believed that different theories of justice would make republican government impossible, and not without reason. Drawing from the

political philosopher John Rawls, Macedo called for a shared public reason in which all debate uses one set of “neutral” first principles. But if these principles are themselves historically rooted and subject to a tradition, then such principles reflect the priority of one tradition over others. Instead, MacIntyre argues that productive moral argument is possible, but only within the traditions themselves. Therefore, if a secular liberal wants to convince a Catholic or an Evangelical or a Marxist that she is right, she must make arguments from within the moral tradition she is arguing against.

Finally, MacIntyre argues that because traditions are sets of coherent stories, their theories of rationality and justice are deeply contextual. Most adherents of a tradition don't reflect on the abstractions of first principles, but rather know what is true and what is good by an instinct that has been molded and shaped by stories. These stories can be shared literature, or they can be lived interactions with others and the stories people tell themselves to make sense of those interactions. Much like MacIntyre's theory of practice, a context-dependent traditional understanding of morality is not relativist - there is a *right* answer within each tradition - but is also not fully objective or naturalistic. Instead, answers are developed over time by the members of the traditions themselves. And so, we can only understand a theory of reason or justice in application to a context; seeing members of a tradition answer moral questions is the best way to understand the nature of the tradition itself.

Education policy is (among other things) a collection of answers to moral questions, and therefore depends on a certain rationality and a certain theory of justice, applied in a certain context. What curriculum ought to be taught? Who decides on methods of

pedagogy? What kinds of assessment are used, and how do we interpret their findings? What distinguishes good teachers from bad, and how do we hire and keep good teachers while removing bad ones? Who has final say in contentious policy decisions, and what impact can other stakeholders have on their decisions? These questions and many others define education policy, but because they are value-based, their answer depends on first principles. That is, different policies can both be “right” from the perspectives of different traditions.

Therefore, education policy can only be understood as the product of the prevailing tradition. School boards in a liberal polity are likely to write different policies than those in more critical jurisdictions. And even more so, independent and religious schools design policies using their own distinct moral language and epistemological principles. Contrary to Macedo, these policies cannot be understood independent of tradition. Therefore, an authentic understanding of Catholic school identity must take Catholic tradition and its internally consistent answers to moral questions as its starting point.

Thomism and the Catholic Tradition

Thomism is the philosophical system St. Thomas Aquinas developed in the 13th century at the intersection between Augustinian orthodox theology and the recently rediscovered works of Aristotle. Though not all Catholic thought is Thomistic, this system has become the common center of the Catholic intellectual tradition since Leo XIII's promulgation of *Aeterni Patris* in 1879. Since then, neo-Thomists such as Jacques Maritain have applied St. Thomas's theology and philosophy to the challenges of the modern world,

including to those of education. Below, I briefly describe the core elements that distinguish Thomistic thought from most modern secular philosophy and that are necessary to understand the virtue ethics central to Catholic education.

The bedrock of Thomistic metaphysics is common sense, based on the alignment between the world, sensory perceptions, and human reason. The paradigmatic break from Thomism began when René Descartes intentionally rejected common sense for the certainty of rational first principles. Descartes argued that senses sometimes deceive us, such as when a straight stick seems crooked when halfway immersed in water, so therefore no sensory experience can be trusted and we can make no defensible objective claim that the stick is straight or crooked. The Thomist instead accepts that sensory experience is perfectly legitimate as a tool for understanding the world (just as most scientists would agree observation is central to their practice), and accepts sense data as a starting point for a qualitative understanding of the nature of being.

From these data, we can use the rational processes of analysis and synthesis to define a being's nature, *i.e.* what it is about the being that distinguishes it from other beings. A being's nature is therefore determined by several of its aspects: what it is made of (material causation), how it is organized (formal causation), who made it this way (efficient causation), and for what purpose it was made (final causation). Consider, for example, a chair. The chair is a chair because it is made of material hard enough to support my weight, because it has a flat seat supported by legs, because it was made by a chair-maker, and because it was made to be sat on. Change these aspects, and it is no longer a chair.

Thomas, like Aristotle before him, argues that humans can and should be understood in this way. Specifically, we are who we are because we are animals (material) who are endowed with the capacity for reason (formal), and who have been made in the image and likeness of God (efficient) for the purpose of that lasting happiness known to Aristotle as *eudaimonia* and to Thomas as *beatitudo* (final). Happiness, or as it is often alternatively translated, “human flourishing,” is a state of being rather than a fleeting emotion, not defined in subjective terms of satisfaction of desire, or even as an analogy to the “flourishing” of non-human living things, but rather as the excellence of what is particularly human (Hursthouse, 1999, p. 9-10; McPherson, 2021, p. 45). Aristotle writes that *eudaimonia* arises from the pursuit of “noble and serious things” rather than joys or pleasures in play. Although pleasure and play are good, he identifies those who set them as the goal of their life as “foolish and excessively childish” (2011). The beatific goal of education, then, is to encourage children to prefer virtue over self-gratifying pleasure (Maritain, 1943). And if *beatitudo* is the goal of education, then the purpose of the school is to cause the student to encounter the art, literature, and science that enchants their world and causes them to ask questions about ultimate meaning (Kristjansson, 2020).

Since all humans share the four causal elements above, we can conclude that flourishing is an objective standard, and that the distinction between good and bad actions is not merely the result of subjective choice. For Thomas, morality isn’t about upholding rights or self-sacrifice for the good of the many, but rather is about choosing actions that lead to human flourishing. Central to this choice is desire for the good, which he believed was inherent in all humans to greater or lesser degree based on disposition and training. A

virtue in this system, such as prudence, justice, courage, or temperance, is defined as a habit for effortlessly choosing those actions that lead closer to beatitude.

Perhaps the most influential critique of Thomistic metaphysics comes from David Hume's "is-ought fallacy." Hume, like other empiricists, agrees with Thomas that we can use observation and common sense in an attempt to understand the world. The problem Hume identifies is that what "is" says nothing about what we "ought" to do, that human nature is morally neutral rather than teleological. The Thomist might respond that is-ought claims are central to our common moral reasoning. Consider a knife: it is irrelevant whether the knife is silver or purple, but I can reasonably claim the knife is a *bad* knife if it fails to cut the tomato on my cutting board. Stated another way, because the object *is* a knife, it *ought* to cut. Thomistic thought is distinct from most modern philosophy on exactly this point: humans have a purpose, Thomists argue, and human morality depends on acting out that purpose. These fundamental philosophical ideas are central to education because virtues are learned dispositions. Therefore, the Thomist believes that it is the central purpose of school (indeed, of all education) to promote virtue in order for students to be happy in a deep and lasting way.

For Jacques Maritain, the most important metaphysical distinction that Thomism creates is between the *person* and the *individual*. Each and every human is both of these, and therefore experiences tension between an animalistic individual nature, driven by instinct, and a divine personal nature, driven by reason. This distinction is essential for education, because "education is not animal training. The education of man is a human awakening" (Maritain, 1943, p. 9). In this system, educating a student so they may

eventually earn more money or social status is no better than training an animal for the sake of pleasure, with only a few extra steps in between. Instead, true education is education for freedom, rightly oriented to the good using St. John Paul II's definition: "Freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the ability to do what we ought" (1995). Freedom, then, requires discipline and self-transcendence.

These concepts of virtue, personhood, and freedom are all connected to beatitude; Thomism is a tradition because it provides a coherent and interconnected framework for understanding both rational and moral issues. As MacIntyre suggests, there have been fierce debates within the Thomist tradition over the nature of these ideas and how they interact with lived reality. And Thomism itself, often through the institution of the Church, maintains an enduring, sometimes tense conversation with its secular peers that cannot be resolved in some neutral arena. Instead, MacIntyre asserts that debates can only be won or lost within a tradition, using only shared moral and epistemological first principles. Both Bryk and Coleman fall short by using the secular language of achievement, efficiency, and citizenship to frame esoteric arguments about flourishing, freedom, and purpose. Because these frames come from outside the Thomist tradition, they fall short of fully describing the nature of Catholic school identity.

Assessing Policy Within Traditions

Any researcher who studies schools must by necessity make choices that indicate a particular perspective, lens, or framework; there can never be neutral science. Choosing quantitative or qualitative methods signals an epistemological theory connecting evidence

to conclusions. Choosing which variables to manipulate and measure implies a theory not only of what can change in schools, but what ought to change. For example, an author who conducts a quantitative study investigating connections between community closure and reduced dropout rates very likely believes at least three foundational ideas: (1) reducing dropout rates is a good goal for schools to pursue, (2) quantitative methods can at least somewhat accurately suggest a causal connection that leads to this result, and (3) the conclusion could potentially be that community closure is, therefore, also beneficial. The first and third claims are claims of justice, and the second is a claim of truth.

Few researchers would argue that reducing dropouts is a bad or even an irrelevant goal for schools to pursue. But as MacIntyre argues, all such moral and epistemological claims are made from within traditions; grounding claims in traditions in this way allows us to understand the claims of good and bad, true and false as compared to other priorities and oriented to a final purpose. As a hyperbolic example, consider a school that implemented a policy to employ secret police to arrest any student attempting to drop out of school. Certainly, dropout rates would decrease! But such a policy would run counter to purposes of school that run far deeper than preventing dropouts. This example illustrates that different schools and different teachers who adhere to different traditions may often choose the same policies (*e.g.* not arresting students for dropping out) despite their different teleological goals. But more realistic decisions - such as whether to require four mathematics credits to graduate high school or three, or whether to prioritize statistics or calculus - can distinguish one tradition from another.

People who participate in distinct traditions certainly can understand and appreciate the goals that others pursue and even perhaps the means they use to accomplish these goals. But accepting whether some idea is true or some action is right are too firmly connected to separate as an outside observer (MacIntyre, 1988, p. 2). A secular math teacher may look at a Catholic math teacher and appreciate or even understand the objectives he is trying to accomplish; indeed there is much these teachers can learn from each other across the many commonalities between their traditions' moral and epistemological convictions. But unless she accepts these goals as the *right* ones, she can never fully accept the ideas behind them as *true*; and unless she accepts the foundational ideas as *true*, she can never fully accept the goals as *right* (p. 389). The two teachers could recognize each others' excellence as math teachers, but they would still make different decisions based on their different goals, and these decisions lead to differences in what each teacher considers as having done a "good" job teaching. Schools that set policy inevitably favor one set of goals over another; any attempt by a school to avoid favoritism by focusing on the neutral aspects both of these teachers have in common is itself a preference instead for a pragmatic set of goals, and therefore a rejection of the transcendence intrinsic to the Catholic tradition.

Recognizing that different traditions have different final purposes is essential both for productive policy debate and for authentic understanding of key concepts, such as school identity. Two schools might have contradictory policies that each can defend as rational from within their own traditions. For example, in *Summerhill*, A.S. Neill (1960) describes policies that do not require student attendance at class and set school-wide decisions on majority vote in which adults have equal voice as first graders. Most schools

would find these policies to be irrational, but to Neill, they are necessary as a consequence of his worldview in which maximizing student agency is the true foundational goal. The goals of Summerhill (as with the goals of Catholic education) are not mysterious, and outside observers can describe them, perhaps even understand them on their own terms. But if such an observer does not believe these goals are the right ones, then any assessment she makes will necessarily be pragmatic, missing something important by separating policy from its telos. Rather than seeking shared agreement and common principles, the recognition of the depth of others' beliefs can instead engender a mutual respect amid a pluralist landscape.

The claims I have made about Catholic education and its foundational goal of beatitude are normative claims; clearly, many Catholic schools and teachers orient themselves to the goals of social mobility, social efficiency, or democratic equality, and the adoption of secular purposes seems to be accelerating (Rymarz, 2013; Fitzpatrick, 2019). Nevertheless, whether or not the individual has analyzed his or her actions to this extent, every action is rooted in a fundamental goal and theories about the nature of the world. There remain significant overlaps between traditions, and many points of agreement; indeed, the common roots of most Western traditions in Aristotelian and Christian thought implies that secular and Catholic traditions have more in common than apart. But the differences matter, particularly as policy makers allocate resources and researchers assess whether decisions and outcomes are effective. These assessments can be made from an outside, etic perspective, but these are necessarily a translation from the decisions made from the inside, emic perspective of those in the tradition (MacIntyre, 1988, p. 370-371).

Policies can only be effective or ineffective, good or bad from the perspective of a tradition. Outside analysts can assess policies based on their own perspectives, as many might criticize the freedom given to students at Summerhill, but in doing so they assume that a neutral purpose and language exist and can allow for universal debate. MacIntyre insists that no such neutral purpose exists, that all moral claims are grounded in the language or idiom of tradition, and that the only way to argue about policies is to do so from within the tradition that designed them. Critics could claim that Summerhill's policies lead to poor test scores or increased dropouts. Neill's school prioritizes students' long-term happiness and moral agency, and any analyst who seeks to criticize its policies must either claim they do not achieve their own stated goals, or that the goals are internally inconsistent. Similarly, analysts must take this approach if they are to assess policies enacted by Catholic schools, rather than assess them from the perspectives of social efficiency, social mobility, or democratic equality.

The Catholic tradition transparently cares about democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility, but the Catholic tradition cares most about beatitude, so any policy Catholic schools enact should be assessed on its ability to inspire or detract from virtue. Policies that give students skills for an efficient workforce are good, insofar as they allow those students to unlock their natural talents, rather than to shuttle them where society wishes them to be. Policies that free students from poverty and the accidents of birth are good, insofar as they promote the infinite worth of all human persons, rather than perpetuate a system that assesses value based on credentials. And policies that give students access to democratic decision making are good, insofar as they serve the common good, rather than giving equal voice to those who might use their power for selfish reasons.

These purposes are means, not the end that beatitude is for Catholic schools. We can only understand these policies authentically by comparing them to the goal they were designed to accomplish, that is, from within the Catholic tradition.

Catholic School Identity from a Thomist Perspective

Thomistic theorists have instead approached this question of Catholic school identity from within the Catholic tradition, and their insights often differ significantly from those of Coleman or Bryk. For a Thomist, a school, like any institution, is good insofar as it promotes beatitude. And since virtues are learned habits that lead to beatitude, Thomists understand good schools as those that intentionally, consistently, and effectively promote virtue: both the individual virtues of prudence, justice, courage, and temperance for students, and the institutional virtues of respect for human dignity, care for the common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity for the school itself.

Jacques Maritain once wrote, “In the flesh and bones of man there exists a soul which is a spirit and which has a greater value than the whole physical universe” (Maritain, 1943, p. 8) summarizing the Christian anthropology that leads Catholic institutions to respect human dignity. Schools that respect the dignity of the human person treat each student as infinitely valuable, as an end to themselves and not as a means for some greater goal such as institutional prestige. Policies and school norms respect this fundamental principle of Catholic social teaching if they consistently elevate the value of the person despite the difficulty and cost of doing so. For example, teachers and school programs respect human dignity when they sacrifice time, effort, and energy to provide extra academic and moral

support to the students most in need. But schools that consistently practice “cream skimming,” teachers who consistently “counsel out” difficult students, and policies that benefit the whole at the expense of the individual, ignore students’ essential human dignity (Jabbar, 2016).

In contrast to respect for human dignity, the respect for the common good centers the good of the whole: both the good of the whole classroom and the good of the whole school. From the first articulations of Catholic social teaching, the Church has described the common good in terms of citizenship, in which every member of the group prioritizes the needs of the many exactly because these group members share common purpose, a shared tradition, and a commitment to resolving disputes through deliberation (Pope Leo XIII, 1891). Schools respect this common citizenship by minimizing tracking and electives, both of which fracture the student body into sub-units. Schools also promote the common good by hosting all-school rituals and community events; no group is a community unless it consistently meets as a whole community. And teachers can promote common good citizenship by encouraging in-class democratic decision making. This deliberative governance process allows individual students to see themselves as part of a coherent community, as sharing common purpose.

Creating this common purpose in the classroom is an example not only of student citizenship, but also of student power. According to Catholic social teaching, the just distribution of power follows the principle of subsidiarity, which delegates decision making to the lowest competent level. From a Thomistic perspective, districts and schools should not make decisions on matters of curriculum, pedagogy, or assessment if the teacher is

capable of making these decisions herself, and districts should not make decisions on matters of policy and governance that instead are the school's domain. Subsidiarity is not in tension with the common good because only small, tight-knit communities are capable of self-governance through consensus and deliberative democracy; the citizenship that serves the common good requires a goodwill and mutually respectful friendship that can only occur in the small groups that subsidiarity demands (Hansot, 2000).

The principle of solidarity is closely related to a respect for the common good, but solidarity is a consistent habit of charity extended to the broader human family; “[solidarity] requires you to look at another and give yourself to another with love” (Pope Francis, 2013). I interpret solidarity as a familial connection to others outside the school and across the world, so schools and classrooms show solidarity by prioritizing a respect for others in a diverse and multicultural world. Solidarity does not demand that the school itself practice multiculturalism; instead the school would participate on the diverse world stage as a Catholic player. Such a pluralist world stage would allow each school to root itself in a coherent tradition, but the commitment to ecumenical dialogue would prevent these schools from becoming dangerously isolated or insular (Strike, 2010). To this end, schools that practice solidarity would be welcoming spaces for all students who are willing to uphold these principles of Catholic social teaching.

Maritain defines education for freedom in humanistic terms: literature, history, languages, and philosophy train the intellect and orient the will in order to elevate the dignity of the human person. These subjects initiate the student into a tradition, not as part of a conservative ossification of the past, but rather to grant the student the foundations

necessary for him to participate in and eventually to direct the community towards the common good. Learning the necessary skills for a trade and career is an essential part of education, but always defers to a more general, liberal arts education, particularly in schools; students with robust humanistic training can easily learn skills in apprenticeships or on the job. Thomistic education is therefore opposed to the social efficiency and social mobility perspectives, and shares much in common with Labaree's democratic equality. The key distinction between the two is that the purpose of Thomistic education is not to create equal citizens, but rather to promote human flourishing. For Maritain, democratic citizenship is good not as the goal of schooling, but as a means to a larger end.

This distinction between means and ends in education is central for Maritain, indeed as it is central for all Thomistic thought. In schooling, means of this sort often manifest as technocratic pedagogies that teachers work tirelessly to perfect, but which cannot have any meaning independent of the students themselves: "The surprising weakness of education today proceeds from our attachment to the very perfection of our modern educational means and methods and our failure to bend them toward the end" (Maritain, 1943, p. 3). Thomistic education is therefore a deeply human, complex, and imperfect practice in which a teacher, knowledgeable in a subject, encounters a student and inflames in her a desire to be a better version of herself. In this example, the better version of the student is beatitude, the teacher is engaging in the meaningful practice of his subject, and the desire he inculcates drives her virtue. For MacIntyre, this sort of coherent moral practice can only happen within the context of a tradition.

Conclusions

Prior research has attempted to understand Catholic schools from perspectives outside the Catholic tradition. But because traditions provide the moral framework through which practitioners make sense of which goals take preference over others, I argue above that only a perspective within the Catholic tradition can authentically understand Catholic school identity. This is not to claim that traditions cannot learn from each other; indeed, they can and frequently do. Often, traditions overlap in such a way that practitioners can share effective means that accomplish multiple goals. But if these means are pointed at divergent ends, then an assessment of whether or not the school or teacher is effective can only assess whether they are effective at accomplishing a certain goal. Outside, etic observers can make insightful connections between these schools' means and their own stated ends, but only inside, emic practitioners actually share these ends as their own. As MacIntyre argued, questions of truth (whether the school is effective) and justice (whether the goals are the right goals) are too interrelated to separate, thus creating some limits on cross-traditional educational understanding.

MacIntyre's observations apply to any coherent tradition, not only to Catholic schools. Certainly, other religious traditions operate schools according to their own fundamental purposes, so a similar analysis could apply to Jewish day schools, Evangelical schools, and madrasas. Indeed, insofar as secular liberalism is itself a tradition, a similar analysis can apply to public schools as well. Researchers such as Coleman and Bryk provide valuable insight when they connect the practices and policies of Catholic education to desirable goals like social mobility, social efficiency, and democratic equality. Catholic

schools demonstrably care about these goals, and any assessment of whether Catholic schools are effective at reaching them is meaningful. But an authentic assessment of Catholic schools can only come from within the Catholic tradition, assessing whether Catholic schools are successful at achieving their own stated goals. The identity of a school is rooted not only in goals that are broadly shared, but also and especially in those that are distinct. The best assessment of how well real schools live up to these normative commitments and uphold their particular identities comes from the perspective of an observer who shares these commitments, goals, identity, and tradition.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

INSTITUTIONALIZING INTERNAL GOODS THROUGH CATHOLIC SCHOOL IDENTITY

What, exactly, makes a Catholic school Catholic? In what ways must Catholic schools be the same as each other, and in what ways must they differ from other forms of school? What causes a school's Catholic identity to flourish or fade over time? The answers to these questions are rooted in a rigorous understanding of organizational identity, and in the ways that identity manifests in the particular context of Catholic schools.

All conceptions of identity depend on boundaries; organizations expect their leaders to determine both what the organization *is* and what it is *not*. Claims of organizational identity are strong if they satisfy three criteria: they must adhere to a similar core mission as other organizations that profess the same identity, they must separate the organization from others that do not share its identity, and they must remain reasonably consistent over time. That is, organizational identity must be central, distinct, and enduring (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Any claim to Catholic school identity must extend across Catholic schools, be distinct from other forms of school, and have roots in the enduring traditions of Catholic educational practice.

Catholic school identity is intrinsically connected to the practice of Catholic education. For Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), practices are complex social activities with moral effects and internal goods that only practitioners can share. Schools are associated with several distinct communities of practice, such as mathematics, athletics, and the arts, each of which has its own norms, moral frameworks, and internal goods. But Catholic

schools make particular efforts to integrate these otherwise disparate practices under the aegis of Catholic teaching. The strength of Catholic school identity, then, depends not only on teachers and students valuing mathematics, athletics, or the arts, but on seeing them as components of the broader practice of Catholic education, orienting the entire school to a particularly Catholic end.

Complicating matters, however, is that while Catholic *education* may be characterized as a practice, Catholic *schools* are institutions, inevitably dependent on external goods such as money and status. Securing these resources often depends on public legitimacy, satisfying parents and policymakers in order to pay salaries and expenses (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). But prestige and wealth are the means and not the ends of Catholic education; they can never be central to the mission of a school. This dichotomy presents schools with a challenge: ignoring external goods risks the school's survival, but ignoring internal goods risks the school's identity. Striking the right balance is the product of sound judgment, a judgment typically made by the school's principal.

In this paper, I apply insights from organizational theory and MacIntyre's theory of practice to characterize Catholic school identity, particularly for Catholic schools in a North American context. I argue that identity flows from a particularly Catholic anthropology of the human person (Groome, 1996), and finds expression in the shared practice of curriculum, community, and ritual (Convey, 2012). By juxtaposing internal and external goods with organizational notions of distinction and legitimacy, the paper also offers a framework for effective Catholic school leadership, rooted in the cultivation of judgment.

Two Frameworks for Catholic School Identity

Catholic schools identify as both religious and academic institutions, connecting them to churches, seminaries, and missions on one hand, and to public schools and universities on the other. But Catholic school identity cannot be as simple as denoting “a school that is Catholic” or “a church that teaches.” Catholic schools have a particular identity, rooted in tradition and practice, that connects them to each other and separates them from both churches and public schools. Below, I define Catholic school identity through the complementary but distinct frames of anthropology and practice, centering the role of principals and the judgment that they use to make administrative decisions.

All organizations face choices for which the best decision is not obvious. For Albert and Whetten (1985), it is in making these choices that organizations reveal their identity. When factual analysis and precedent fail to provide clear guidance for these decisions, organizations must ask, “Who are we?” An adequate answer to this question must satisfy three criteria: (1) the answer must accord with the character of the organization, (2) it must distinguish the organization from others that may otherwise be similar to it, and (3) it must be recognizably consistent over time (p. 265). For Catholic school identity, the answer must be central to the organization’s identity *as a Catholic school*, and the evidence for this centrality should be broad acceptance across other Catholic schools. The characteristics that Catholic schools share with public schools and universities form their identity as a school, and those they share with churches, seminaries, and missions form their identity as a Catholic institution, but their identity as a Catholic school derives from characteristics shared with other Catholic schools.

Several authors (O’Keefe, 1998; Miller, 2006; Sultmann & Brown, 2013, 2014) and ecclesial documents (SCCE, 1977; CCE, 1997; USCCB, 2006; CCE, 2015; CCE, 2022) have attempted to define Catholic school identity, but the most commonly cited definitions appear in the work of Groome (1996) and Convey (2012). Catholic school identity answers a slightly different question for each of these authors. Inquiring into the religious and philosophical elements of education, Groome associates identity with anthropology of the human person, the sacramentality of Catholic life, an emphasis on community, relationship, and tradition, and an appreciation of rationality as complementary to faith. Convey adopts a more institutional approach, asking where and how Catholic identity manifests in schools. His four-part model locates Catholic school identity in the religion program; in the general curriculum; in faith, community, and service; and in rituals and symbols. Much of the literature below uses one or both of these models as a starting point for analysis, and I argue that both constructs are necessary for a comprehensive and actionable understanding of Catholic school identity.

Groome considers anthropology the fundamental starting point for all Catholic religious education. Conceptions of human nature and the source of meaning in life define a coherent worldview, which religious education helps students understand and articulate (Van der Kooij, de Ruyter & Miedema, 2013; CCE, 2015). The catechesis, or learning about faith, that defines Catholic school identity not only aids students in this self-explanation, but its teachings are also a major source of unity in the school (Gros, 1999; USCCB, 2005). The Congregation for Catholic Education writes that “education always presupposes and involves a definite concept of man and life” (1997). Because this concept stems from the *Imago Dei*, in which God created humans in His “image and likeness” (Gen 1:27), Catholic

education aims to promote human dignity and equality, or what McLaughlin (2000a) calls “authentic humanity.” This anthropology manifests in Catholic schools when “students, parents, and staff experience first and foremost the common decency, fairness, care, and graciousness of a very human Christ, in its daily conduct” (McLaughlin, 2000b). Such “humanizing” education means “putting the person at the center of education, in a framework of relationships that make up a living community, which is interdependent and bound to a common destiny” (CCE, 2017, 8; CCE, 2022, 16).

Traditional Catholic anthropologies can also focus on the nature of sin and human brokenness, encouraging the faithful to desire the good and fulfill their authentic humanity. As St. Irenaeus wrote, “the glory of God is the human person fully alive,” so the traditional purpose of a Catholic school is to direct students towards a more virtuous life (Groome, 1996). The Church believes, according to natural law theology, that this virtuous life is both objectively knowable and difficult to obtain, requiring individuals to discipline their habits in obedience to the principles of natural law (Boland, 2012). Groome argues that Christ’s visible presence in the human world through sacraments such as baptism, confession and the Eucharist reminds Catholics of their divinely ordered nature, and therefore motivates them to work toward virtue (Maritain, 2015). Successful schools modify their emphasis to match the needs of their student populations, and these populations are not necessarily comprised entirely of believing Catholics (Donlevy, 2007), but in order to be a Catholic school, these schools must be rooted in a Catholic anthropology and manifested in the sacraments of the Church (Groome, 1996).

Rather than a cause for concern, religious and cultural diversity among students in Catholic schools can be seen as an opportunity for intercultural dialogue. Under the condition that the dialogue is “set out from a deep seated knowledge of the specific identity of the various dialogue partners... diversity ceases to be seen as a problem” (CCE, 2013, #27). In a Catholic school, this knowledge is rooted in a Christian epistemology of Jesus Christ as the *Logos*, the foundation of reason and intelligibility of the world (Maritain, 2005, p. 133-134). “Such rationality coupled with Catholic anthropology means encouraging people to think for themselves, to trust their own discernment and decision making. Its sacramentality suggests helping people to think with imagination and perception, to discern the ultimate in the immediate, and to be critically conscious of society” (Groome, 1996, p. 121). By orienting the knowledge creation in a school towards the *Logos*, Catholic schools satisfy their responsibilities to *Imago Dei* anthropology and to sacramental consciousness, even given religious and cultural diversity within the student body.

Sacramentality, then, is the faithful conception of encountering God’s presence and grace in and through the ordinary aspects of life (Groome, 1996, p. 112). Whereas Groome argues that Catholic schools must be Catholic in the things they *believe*, Convey (2012) locates Catholic school identity in the practice and structures of the school. That is, schools become Catholic in the things they *do*, such as celebrating Mass regularly, setting aside time for school-wide prayer every day, and hanging a crucifix in each classroom. These practices are distinct from those of secular and Protestant schools, and they explicitly connect the school to the practices of Catholicism more generally. Convey argues in particular that the practice of Catholic school identity derives from an explicitly Catholic curriculum and from a teaching corps that is willing to uphold and defend the Catholic tradition.

Because they are the representatives of the school with the most direct connection to students, teachers are often the primary agents for communicating the school's Catholic identity. The strength of a school's Catholic identity often depends on the commitment of its teachers, which is "a consequence deriving from [teachers'] faith, a faith which becomes active through love" (CCE, 2007, #25). Teachers' commitment to Catholic identity varies, but one of the most important determinants is their longevity; schools whose teachers remain for many years often have stronger Catholic school identities (Convey, 2012; Hobbie, Convey & Schuttloffel, 2010). Not all teachers in Catholic schools are Catholic themselves; in fact the proportion of Catholic teachers has been in decline (Rymarz, 2013), a source of concern insofar as Catholic teachers are more likely to remain committed to the school (Cho, 2017) and more likely to provide a lived faith experience as an example for their students (Lydon, 2009). Despite these findings, most Catholic school teachers work to strengthen the mission of the school (Grace, 2002).

On the assumption that teachers of religion are particularly entrusted with this mission, Convey distinguishes between religion teachers and teachers more generally. Most Catholic schools host a particular religion class for the purposes of catechesis, in which students read scripture and study both apologetics and Church teachings. As such, religion class is particularly important for communicating the Catholic identity of the school (USCCB, 2005, p. 231) and particularly dependent on Catholic teachers; the school's Catholic identity is threatened when Catholic schools hire teachers who "do not know or do not fully accept some Catholic teachings themselves" (Convey, 2012, p. 191). Convey found that Catholic school teachers - Catholic and non-Catholic alike - believe that teaching

Catholic doctrine in religion class is the second most important component of Catholic school identity, behind only the presence of a strong community of faith.

Catholic school principals, on the other hand, prioritize the integration of Catholic teachings across the curriculum as more important than the content of the religion class. This “permeation” of Catholic identity across the curriculum is an increasingly difficult challenge for many schools, as families, students, and teachers are increasingly less likely to approach these subjects from a religious perspective (Rymarz, 2013). For decades, the Church has encouraged teachers of literature, history, science, and even mathematics to center Catholic identity in pedagogy, curricular choices, and statements of purpose (CCE, 1997; CCE 2013), and the Church has made clear that reducing Catholic identity to the purview of certain designated officials (such as theology faculty or a school chaplain) is contrary to the religious mission of the school (CCE, 2022, 69). For example, lessons in mathematics can lead to the contemplation of the order in the world, and to connections between math, science, and history, promoting a comprehensive unity of knowledge (Galioto & Marini, 2021). But tensions often emerge between principals, who expect cross-curricular integration, and teachers, who may promote disciplinary norms above religious expectations and can often subvert the latter by teaching in secular ways (Fitzpatrick, 2019). One effective way that principals have encouraged teachers to promote cross-curricular connections is to intentionally include Catholic identity in the planning, training, and assessment processes of schools from the beginning (Maney, King & Kiely, 2017).

Catholic school principals hold the responsibility both for hiring and supporting a teaching staff that is willing and able to uphold the Catholic tradition in their classes and for negotiating the school's relationship with state and Church education policy; effective practice of Catholic education can depend on how effective the principal is at multiple roles, as a spiritual, educational, and managerial leader (Hobbie, Convey & Schuttloffel, 2010). Successful Catholic school leadership depends at least in part on the cultural capital these principals bring to their role (Belmonte & Cranston, 2009), but that particular blend of skills may be dying (Neidhart & Lamb, 2016), particularly as principal training has focused more on educational and not spiritual leadership (Boyle, Haller & Hunt, 2016). Not only is strong leadership associated with maintaining the identity of Catholic schools, but the reverse is true as well: teachers who perceived their school to have a strong Catholic identity associated that identity with strong leadership (Hobbie, Convey & Schuttloffel, 2010). These deep connections imply that principals who conceive of the educational and spiritual leadership roles as mutually reinforcing are more likely to be successful at both (Branson, Marra & Buchanan, 2019). Thus, leadership is connected to identity through distinctly Catholic teaching, a curriculum by religious purpose, and a balance between Church teachings and state policies.

When Catholic school leaders encounter difficult decisions – the type that forces them to ask “Who are we?” – they find answers both in a particularly Catholic anthropology and in the practice of sacramentality that has been the Church's traditional response for centuries. These foundational principles then inform a series of practices, curricula, and relationships that both define Catholic school identity and inform the decisions of practitioners in the future. Because these beliefs and practices reach to foundational

principles of the Christian worldview, they are central to the schools' Catholic identity (CCE, 2015). Because they are particularly Catholic, they are distinct from the beliefs and practices that animate the decisions and relationships of secular and even Protestant schools. And because these beliefs and practices have motivated the Church for centuries, and Catholic school leaders for decades, they connect to an enduring tradition. Consequently, Groome's anthropological conception and Convey's rooted practices are not contradictory, but complementary and mutually reinforcing frameworks that together define Catholic school identity.

Excellent Education and Internal Goods

Organizational identity in general and Catholic school identity in particular are connected to tradition and practice, as outlined in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre (1981). For MacIntyre, a practice is a social activity with internally defined standards of excellence. These standards are then shared among practitioners, creating an enduring tradition. The centrality, distinctiveness, and enduring nature of these standards implies a connection between practice and identity. I argue below that Catholic education has many of the key properties ascribed to practices - such as a common mission and a connection to an explicit tradition - and therefore that Catholic school identity is the natural consequence of the pursuit of its particular internal goods. Further, I demonstrate that leaders of Catholic schools, particularly principals, must balance the internal goods that grant identity against the external goods that allow for the school's survival. The theory of practice can therefore inform the decisions these leaders must make.

MacIntyre contrasts practices with institutions, and the distinction is key for an understanding of school identity. Practices are complex social endeavors organized around the acquisition and distribution of internal goods (Donozo, 2017), which are unique to the practice and cannot be transferred or purchased, only earned by achieving excellence according to internal standards (Banks, 2012). For example, in baseball the joys and honors of excellent play can only be earned by players who dedicate significant effort to improving and who emulate great players before them. In contrast, institutions are social groups that organize themselves around the acquisition and distribution of external goods, often wealth, power, and prestige. External goods are not bad, and are often necessary, but they are never more than means, and are therefore morally neutral (Hager, 2011). Baseball teams must make money through ticket sales and concessions in order to continue playing, but their claim to the internal goods of a practice is weakened if they sacrifice excellent play for greater profits.

In the four decades since MacIntyre (1981) developed his theory of practice several scholars have debated the boundaries and definitions of the theory, and have pushed to resolve its contradictions, particularly in regards to education (MacIntyre & Dunne, 2002; Higgins, 2011; Hager, 2011; Stolz, 2016; Mueller, 2019). For MacIntyre, practices are necessary in the modern, post-Enlightenment West because there is an absence of a unifying tradition (Vokey, 2003). Internal to activities like baseball are the kind of shared purpose and *esprit de corps* that in older times would have derived from religious or cultural traditions. Even if one grants that education in general is a complex social endeavor with particular standards of excellence, *religious* education seems to blur the boundary between practice and tradition, since its explicit purpose is to connect children to

a particular value system; for Catholic schools, this system is rooted in *Imago Dei* anthropology and finds expression in both the cardinal and theological virtues. However, I argue that the distinction between *education* and *schools* demonstrates that religious or mission-oriented education promotes particular internal goods, and therefore qualifies as a practice.

Schools are clearly institutions, and therefore organize themselves to acquire the wealth, power, and prestige necessary for survival. Private schools pursue these external goods through tuition, admissions, and marketing, while public schools pursue them through political channels. Schools need financial resources to pay the salaries of teachers, and public schools that politicians perceive as being less effective at publicly accessible goals, such as academic efficacy, are less likely to receive these resources. Indeed, as districts move to consolidate or shutter neighborhood schools on the basis of under-enrollment or low test scores, the only response many communities can use to preserve community spaces is an appeal to democratic political power, often through protest (Ewing, 2018). While a district's rational, external analysis may suggest that communities are better served by closing schools, communities themselves may argue that intangible goods such as tradition, accessibility, and a sense of place are deserving of institutional support. Stories of neighborhood school communities demonstrate that institutions and external goods are necessary, if morally neutral, but that it is internal goods that grant the school its identity and its moral value.

MacIntyre denies that education is a practice with its own internal goods (MacIntyre & Dunne, 2002), and instead argues that the school hosts practices such as mathematics or

music. But this conception would imply that a school is a neutral, institutional host, and therefore could not have any moral identity *as a school*. The example of neighborhoods rallying to defend their school for internally coherent reasons makes no sense if the school itself has no claim to internal goods from the practice of education; clearly these communities believe in school identity and at least an implicitly moral vision of education. MacIntyre himself wrote about recent school closings in Chicago, and said: “those who served the common goods of these schools served the common goods of the local communities and the closing of the schools was destructive of the already fragile bonds of local community” (2016, p. 203). “Common goods” are internal to these community schools, and it is their pursuit that grants the school identity in connection with the community. Though it is true that excellent “community schooling” attends specifically to the parochial needs of the individual community, and therefore few standards of practice are shared across such schools, the defense of these (ostensibly failing) schools implies that they participated in a broader community identity and were the site of particular internal goods.

Public schools with a strong sense of place develop good adults by communicating to them the values of their community, which implies that teachers who are from the community are more likely to be excellent practitioners than those who are not (Brantlinger, 2020). Though communities may have different value systems, and consequently different conceptions of what it means to be a “good” adult, a commitment to place becomes a good in itself. For example, teachers in these schools might take more pride in students who remain anchored into their home community as adults, rather than leaving to pursue more lucrative careers far away. In contrast, schools with no particular

connection to place and no clear value system outside of academic achievement (*e.g.* magnet schools) might agree that their mission is not excellent education, but rather excellent practice of mathematics, literature, or science; teachers and students in these schools take satisfaction not in creating or becoming integrated adults, but in creating or becoming mathematicians, writers, and scientists. While these schools may have more coherent identities than a comprehensive high school, their identities are nevertheless limited to their area of focus.

Academic success can grant legitimacy to such schools, as well as to Catholic schools, by rendering them effective in the perception of public stakeholders, but such legitimacy is independent of the identity of the school as an organization. Instead, identity derives from communities of place, centered around the values of a particular geographically closed community, or from communities of purpose, centered around a particular mission (Strike, 2010). Mission, or purpose, is what grants meaning to an organization's actions, and is connected to the narrative that gives purpose to individuals' actions. MacIntyre (1981) describes how personal identity derives from a social role. The answer to "Who am I?" is always some iteration of "I am a teacher/student/father/friend," and the strength of that identity derives from how effectively the individual satisfies the expectations of the role (p. 216). Organizational identity then derives from how effectively the school satisfies (*i.e.* through its collective practice) the expectations of its mission, as Catholic schools have, historically (Bryk, Lee & Holland, 1993).

Schools that host a community of purpose also find their internal goods in the development of children into good adults, and have a particular value system that they use

to judge excellent practice. These internal goods provide evidence for Convey's (2012) finding that the presence of Catholic teachers bolsters a school's Catholic identity, as do schools that integrate Catholic education across the entire curriculum. In contrast, schools that conceive of themselves as neutral forums for individual teachers to impart discrete disciplinary standards or to express their own value systems, including Catholic schools that restrict religion to religion class (Holmes, 1992), have no central mission and therefore have a weak school identity (CCE, 2013). A clearly defined mission can extend Catholic school identity, even across multiple schools, if their practitioners are committed to distributed leadership and maintaining a community of practice among principals, teachers, parents, and students (Hutching, Cunningham, Aldana & Ruiz, 2017). In this sense, Catholic education might be considered a "meta-practice" that hosts other practices and orients their own internal goods to a new purpose in accord with the purposes of the school.

In a Catholic context, a "good" adult is a *virtuous* adult, one who habitually chooses the good for themselves and for others (Anscombe, 1958). Catholic school students may look back on their time in a Catholic school and remember how the academics prepared them to be a successful engineer, musician, or novelist, but if Catholic education is a practice, these considerations must be secondary to how the school prepared them to be faithful, hopeful, charitable, courageous, diligent, just, and prudent. Of course, diligent and prudent engineers are better engineers, so the practice of Catholic education can and does have significant positive academic consequences (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). But Catholic education considers academic outcomes secondary to the primary purpose of developing

virtue, and therefore the internal goods of excellent Catholic educational practice are instead the satisfaction at developing virtuous adults.

The methods schools use to pursue these internal goods differs between Catholic schools, which allow for significant internal diversity. Consider the striking differences between schools operated by Jesuits, Franciscans, and Salesians, as well as differences in character between urban, suburban, and rural Catholic schools. But the connection to virtue ensures that internal goods are consistent across schools. The associated virtues are intrinsically motivated habits, cultivated through the lived experiences of committed teachers (Cho, 2012) who share their stories of personal witness and religious interaction with the world (Rossiter, 2010). Many of the internal goods of Catholic schools overlap with internal goods of other schools. For instance, both Catholic and public schools might reasonably pursue a pride of place, and Catholic schools certainly share the internal goods of faith and piety with Jewish, Muslim, and Protestant schools. But in a Catholic school, those experiences, stories, and virtues explicitly connect to the Catholic tradition. The virtues students develop lead them to become a particular expression of a good person, the divinely ordered human person who was made in the *Imago Dei*. Schools that use Catholic sacraments and practices to encourage their students to become virtuous in this way are Catholic schools, and thus Catholic tradition creates in schools a central, distinct, and enduring identity.

Teachers in Catholic schools can witness to these types of virtues, such as faith, hope, charity, courage, and temperance. But Catholic schools also promote intellectual virtues by focusing on the symbiotic relationship between faith and reason. Thomistic

thought is founded on the principle that truth cannot contradict truth, that faith and reason reflect the same reality (Boland, 2012). The Catholic intellectual tradition therefore references not only scripture, but also the liberal arts, classic texts, and critical rationality. “Such rationality,” writes Groome (1996), “coupled with Catholic anthropology means encouraging people to think for themselves, to trust their own discernment and decision making.” In MacIntyre’s (1988) theory, virtues can never cohere into a narrative that grants meaning and identity unless they are subject to rational criticism. By deliberating on the meaning of these ideas, students and teachers draw on a shared history, and come to a shared consensus on values that, paradoxically, requires internal and ongoing debate (Lovin, 1988).

Practices can impart group identity in ways that institutions cannot. The acquisition of external goods, though sometimes necessary, is always in reference to institutional survival. In contrast, internal goods provide a teleological purpose for practices, *i.e.* a goal that exists independently from the world outside the practice. Practices may be required to sacrifice external goods for the sake of internal goods; if a baseball player lays down a sacrifice bunt, he may be giving up an opportunity for a hit that could benefit his future earnings, but he’s helping the team win “the right way.” The line between internal and external goods may be blurrier than MacIntyre suggests (Hager, 2011), but the essential move is towards an internal standard of excellence. Practices protect society from instrumentalism, because without practices the means of achieving external goods, such as dealmaking and power politics, become ends themselves (Higgins, 2011). Catholic schools as practices must not sacrifice their mission to the externally defined goals of gaining

tuition (CCE, 1997), “selling” academic excellence (Fuller & Johnson, 2014), or orienting themselves entirely to state accountability standards (CCE, 2009).

Principals have the responsibility for creating and maintaining Catholic school identity, since they are not only academic leaders, but managerial and spiritual leaders as well (Ciriello, 1998). If principals can push teachers and students to pursue the internal goods not of individual academic subjects, but of a consistent and coherent vision of virtuous adulthood, then they are strengthening the Catholic identity of their schools. But of course, these principals must simultaneously consider the external goods that all schools require; Catholic schools in particular must support themselves by tuition, and therefore must recruit and attract families who are able and willing to pay to attend. These external goods depend on perceptions of the school as legitimate, an organizational quality that can potentially run counter to the demands of Catholic school identity. Balancing these competing demands remains the primary responsibility of Catholic school principals.

Constructing Identity in Organizations

Identity as a concept relies on two fundamental defining features. First, identity is a conception of who someone *is*. For an organization, that means understanding what makes the organization valuable, including its goals, mission, and culture (Whetten, 2006; Albert & Whetten, 1985). Second, identity is a conception of who someone is *not*. Both people and organizations define themselves by what makes them different from others (MacDonald, 2013). These two components of identity - value and distinction - are often complementary; an organization might be uniquely capable of success on some value scale.

But the desire to be unique can be in tension with the desire to be valuable in the opinion of others who rely on external, rather than internal standards of judgment. Thus, organizations try to pursue both distinctiveness and legitimacy (Gioia, Thomas, Clark & Chittipeddi, 1994).

In organizational theory, the purpose of policy is to build legitimacy, which is a collective opinion that the organization is worthy of respect (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In a well-developed field of organizations, legitimacy derives not only from the opinions of individual clients (*i.e.* students and families) but also those of regulatory institutions, media, and other stakeholders. Institutions can build legitimacy through competence, by achieving the goals set for the institution, but a key idea in institutional theory is that legitimacy is somewhat irrational; legitimacy is gained by adhering to the expectations of stakeholders, not necessarily by being efficient (Rowan & Miskel, 1999). The desire for legitimacy then leads to isomorphism, a homogenization of organizations to a single or a few closely related models (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). States or other powerful organizations can mandate isomorphism (coercive), or it can result from imitating successful organizations (mimetic), or it can be the result of common standards and training of relevant decision makers (normative), but the result is the same: policies that serve to reduce distinctiveness for the sake of legitimacy (Rowan & Miskel, 1999).

The clearest source of isomorphism in Catholic education is institutional regulation, both religious and secular. The Church is a hierarchical organization that regulates subordinate institutions such as schools. And from the beginning of compulsory education in the late 19th century, Catholic schools in the United States have submitted themselves to

increasing state regulation in exchange for their right to exist as a viable alternative to public schools (Gross, 2018). They are now required to administer some standardized tests, provide special education services, and adhere to nondiscrimination laws (Fuller & Johnson, 2014). Catholic universities also had to form similar compromises, indicating that this motion towards conformity with academic standards set by public schools was not limited to Catholic K-12 education (Gleason, 1995). It is not my purpose here to argue for or against any of these regulations, but only to say that their existence has reduced the distinctions between Catholic and public schools. Both types of school exist in the same institutional environment, and “the hypothesis that organizations conform to institutionalized rules suggests that, over time, organizations in the *same* institutional environment will come to resemble one another” (Rowan & Miskell, 1999, p. 366). The root of the resemblance is bureaucratic organization that ascribes organizational legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The need for legitimacy is one way to understand why Catholic schools adhere to state standards, despite the tensions between these regulations and Catholic schools’ desire to remain distinct (Grace, 2002).

Market pressures are less explicit than state regulations, but no less potent in their ability to drive decisionmaking. Schools that compete for the same students and face similar environmental conditions will mimic organizations seen as “leaders” in the field (Childers, 2012). Once these schools’ religious missions fade, they become more likely to look and act like others (Lambert, 2014). Catholic schools cannot rely on state funding to pay their teachers’ salaries, which have increased over time as the number of nuns and priests has diminished and the proportion of lay teachers has increased (Rebore, Breslin & Rebore, 1999). While some schools are funded by their parishes or through cost-sharing

programs, most rely on student tuition. This shift has forced schools to recruit students and families, which not only erodes the Church's mission to serve the poor and marginalized, but encourages schools to "strategically abandon" religious commitments in order to emphasize academic excellence vis-à-vis public schools (Davies & Davies, 2009). As social mobility has gained purchase as a primary goal of schools (Labaree, 1997), and as standardized testing has made comparing schools on academic indicators easier if not more accurate (Schneider, 2017), Catholic schools have increasingly based their legitimacy on competitive metrics such as test scores, college acceptance rates, and future student earnings (Grace, 2002).

A third source of isomorphism is the increasingly standardized training of educational policy-makers, principals, and teachers. As in public schools, Catholic school teachers have become more professionalized over the past forty years (Cook, 2001), as a system that had once been entirely independent by the 1960s began to deliberately model itself after the public schools (Gross, 2018). Professionalism is a major source of legitimacy, but this transition to a more professional educational approach also instigated a crisis of identity in the Catholic educational sector, as Catholic schools were increasingly led by lay, professional teachers rather than ordained priests and nuns (Gleason, 1995). Teachers gain respect when they graduate from recognizable programs, schools gain respect when they provide opportunities for career advancement, and both gain respect when they demonstrate competency (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). As the number of nuns and priests in Catholic schools declines, teachers are increasingly the product of the same educational preparation as those in public schools. This sort of professionalism relies on external standards, rather than the internal narrative of the school's mission (Polos, Hannan &

Carroll, 2002). While the two may overlap, professional legitimacy necessarily interferes with the distinctiveness of the school.

By the same token, external legitimacy is distinct from the internal goods whose pursuit defines a strong Catholic school identity. Pursuing a legitimacy that creates coercive, mimetic, or normative isomorphism cannot be central, since survival itself can never be the purpose of an organization; and this pursuit cannot be distinct, since by definition isomorphisms reduce differences between organizations. So the pursuit of legitimacy cannot be the same as the pursuit of Catholic school identity, although they are not necessarily in conflict. For example, if the target population of families already desires the internal goods of Catholic education, then building legitimacy in this population can also serve to strengthen Catholic school identity. Indeed, this connection may be the source of Coleman's claim that the Catholic school effect derives from a functionally closed parish community (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). But for most Catholic schools, the pursuit of legitimacy and identity requires some trade-offs, and therefore demands a delicate balance of leadership. This leadership most often rests on the shoulders of Catholic school principals.

One of the most consistent themes across the Catholic school identity literature is the role of the principal in creating and maintaining the school's identity. Organizational theory already holds that school principals directly affect school culture, either in a positive or negative way (Fullan, 2008). But Convey (2012) called principals "particularly important in Catholic schools," (p. 192) because they are simultaneously the academic, managerial, and spiritual leaders of their schools. Other authors call the principal a

contemplative leader (Schuttloffel, 2013) and the architect of Catholic culture (Cook, 2001). Because Catholic school principals' leadership can't simply be management, but must also be visionary and cultural leadership, Hobbie, Convey and Schuttloffel (2010) found that Catholic school identity and effective principal leadership are mutually reinforcing.

Principals are particularly influential in moments of decision or change. As public schools changed their core values in the wake of the accountability movement and standards based reform in the two decades since No Child Left Behind, private and Catholic schools also had to renegotiate their identity as they responded to new isomorphic and social pressures (Neumerski & Cohen, 2019). Interestingly, non-Catholic private schools such as Montessori or IB schools faced more significant identity challenges at this time, since their identities were rooted in answers to academic questions, while Catholic school identities remained more robust in comparison because their identity was religious, giving the principals of these schools more opportunity to address new social responsibilities within their extant identity. But even these schools were forced to address identity questions as the educational landscape shifted, as changes of identity reflect more than changing goals, but also changing capacity (Neumerski & Cohen, 2019).

These findings correspond to the understanding of organizational identity as central, distinct, and enduring (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Principals use these criteria either when confronting dilemmas or when defending their actions to those outside the school (Whetten, 2006). Catholic school principals frequently encounter these kinds of decisions, such as when balancing their commitment to both academic excellence and a faith-centered curriculum (Garcia-Huidobro, 2017), or to the financial health of the school

and the preferential enrollment of the poor (Gleeson, 2015). These decisions are different than the decisions faced by principals of public schools, who do not have to consider theological virtues or an orientation to *Imago Dei* anthropology. Regardless of school type, principals make choices based on the school's identity, choosing "what the organization must do to avoid acting out of character" (Whetten, 2006, p. 221). Then they work backwards from a vision of school to the particular policies of curriculum and instruction, communicating their conception of the school's identity symbolically, in professional development, and through their relationships with teachers and staff (Rhodes, Stevens & Hemmings, 2011).

Catholic school principals must often navigate the school as a political environment, in which some stakeholders may view academic goals as more legitimate than those more central to the religious mission of the school (Fuller & Johnson, 2014). Leaders build legitimacy by building relationships, demonstrating their own competence, and adhering to a consensus understanding of expectations for teachers and students (Ellis, Skidmore & Combs, 2017). Principals distributing leadership to teachers can build internal legitimacy by deepening teachers' personal investment and creating a shared sense of work towards the common good of the school (Prokopchuk, 2016). Principal-agent theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976) suggests that delegating any real authority to teachers is risky, as teachers will act in their own rational self-interest rather than that of the school (Rowan & Miskell, 1999). But a core purpose of building a strong school culture is to engender a commitment to the values of a shared educational vision over individualized self-interest (Rhodes, Stevens & Hemmings, 2011). Teachers then communicate these values through their classroom practice (Rowan & Miskell, 1999). This connection may be why schools with an

experienced teaching corps tend to have a stronger Catholic school identity (Hobbie, Convey & Schuttloffel, 2010), and conversely, rapid teacher turnover “may be a prescription for an unfocused Catholic environment” (Convey, 2012).

In some ways, Catholic school identity is a reaction to the external pressures of legitimacy. An institutional lens often frames legitimacy in tension with efficiency; institutions might “buffer” themselves from the criticism that they haven’t efficiently achieved their goals if they maintain respect in the eyes of certain stakeholders (Rowan & Miskell, 1999). But in this analysis, legitimacy comes at the cost of distinction. Both legitimacy and distinction serve organizational identity, but in different ways: school identity gains strength both when stakeholders respect the school for what it is, and when they choose that particular school because of what it is not. Teachers and regulatory agencies contribute to schools’ identities and frame their pursuit of legitimacy, but principals are most important for navigating these choppy waters. These roles and their reaction to external pressures explain significant aspects of Catholic school identity, but other approaches are necessary for a more complete understanding.

The Balance Between Identity and Survival

To address this paper’s claim about the balance Catholic school principals must strike between survival and identity, I use MacIntyre’s (1981) theory of practice as a theoretical framework for understanding the distinction between internal and external goods. A practice is a social activity that extracts excellence from its practitioners, who achieve this excellence in pursuit of internal goods: joy, esteem, satisfaction at a job well

done (Banks, 2012). It is not individual practitioners but the community as a whole that determines the criteria of excellent practice. In this way, internal goods and the excellence of practices are both socially defined and objective (Donozo, 2017). In contrast, external goods are appealing to all practitioners across any community, so their pursuit is not socially defined and they make no objective claims to excellence.

No institution, schools certainly included, can survive long without external goods, but they remain morally neutral. In contrast to internal goods, which are sourced in the community of practice, external goods often are often tokens of the respect and esteem of the broader community, *i.e.* a marker of legitimacy. Markets and policy environments serve as arenas in which legitimacy can be transformed into wealth or power, respectively (Lynch & Moran, 2006), but because these arenas have preconceptions of the kinds of institutions that deserve respect, and therefore legitimacy, they are also sources of isomorphism (Rowan & Miskel, 1999). Catholic schools may try to resist conformity by tapping into the financial and social resources of closed parish communities (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987) and these solutions may mitigate the tension between the institutional need for resources and its desire for strong Catholic identity. But many schools, including Catholic schools, financially survive by marketing themselves to families, convincing them to spend their tuition or vouchers at their school by reason of superior academic efficacy or extracurricular programs (Natale & Doran, 2011). If academic efficacy, itself an essential component to intellectual virtue, is decontextualized from an integrated and particularly Catholic worldview, *i.e.* if the school markets its academic efforts to parents as an opportunity to build career skills that accrue wealth and prestige, then the link between

legitimacy and the external goods of the institution is strengthened, and the link between the practice of education and Catholic school identity is weakened (Grace, 2002).

These external goods can never be a source of Catholic school identity, since the identity of any organization is strengthened insofar as its tenets are central, distinct, and enduring (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Instead, identity derives from the difficult choices organizations make, particularly when factual analysis and organizational precedent fail to provide a clear path forward. At this point, leaders of the organization look to its identity. Catholic school principals make these decisions by considering what their school should do *as a Catholic school*. These answers tether the school in three directions: to other Catholic schools, in distinction from other types of school, and to the school's own history. These central, distinct, and enduring identity connections make clear that organizational identity is socially constructed, but objective to the individual school at any particular moment. As such, organizational identity comes from the pursuit of internal goods.

If organizational identity comes from the pursuit of internal goods, then distinctions between these identities - and between practices - come from distinctions between which internal goods the organizations pursue. The internal goods of education are the joys and satisfactions that teachers, parents, and administrators achieve at the recognition that they have developed children into good adults. These goods are in contrast to forms of education that are not coherent practices, but are rather the institutional manifestations of several practices (*i.e.* arts, athletics, mathematics, etc.) in which teachers, families, and administrators at those schools would feel the joy and satisfaction of developing young artists, athletes, and engineers. Concepts such as academic efficacy can build schools'

legitimacy as institutions, but they cannot build schools' identity as practices because the desire for academic efficacy is widespread across many kinds of school, and therefore cannot distinguish one type of school from another. Crucially, this distinction is not an indictment of the latter set of schools, as the practice of mathematics is equally valid as the practice of education, but schools that are oriented around multiple practices cannot have a coherent organizational identity, such as a Catholic school identity.

A particularly *Catholic* education would then have a particularly Catholic definition of "good" adulthood, which is centered on virtue. Two complementary frameworks provide insight into this particularity of Catholic education: Groome (1996) describes Catholic identity in terms of *Imago Dei* anthropology, and Convey (2012) sources Catholic identity in particularly Catholic curricula and practices of the school. In the Christian worldview, all humans are made in the image and likeness of God, which implants in them a desire to behave in a way that respects this divine parentage. Virtues are habits for choosing the good, so the Catholic school should reward virtuous action through consistent teaching, community participation, and explicit rituals. Virtue is the connection between Groome's *why* and Convey's *how*, and is the internal good that is the source of Catholic education as a practice.

Catholic schools in the United States are reliant on tuition for the funds necessary to pay teachers and purchase school supplies. But acquiring the necessary tuition funding has become increasingly difficult for several reasons: the decreasing Catholic population - and the increasing mistrust in the Church after the revelations of sexual assault in the past several decades - has reduced the demand for Catholicity in schools, all while the

decreasing numbers of priests and nuns have caused Catholic school costs to escalate (Rebore, Breslin & Rebore, 1999). Principals can and have responded to these challenges in myriad ways: by marketing their school to wealthy Catholics who can afford the raised tuition (Gleeson, 2015), by privileging academic excellence and therefore marketing themselves to non-Catholics (Fuller & Johnson, 2013), and by developing cost-sharing models that reduce the school's reliance on tuition (Aldana, 2015), among other approaches. Note that these approaches necessarily privilege external goods, but many schools who have not used these approaches have not survived (Meyer, 2007).

This paper provides a framework for understanding the decisions of principals and their consequences for Catholic school identity, and can therefore guide future research into this particular connection, particularly for Catholic schools in a North American context. Principals often must decide between pursuing the internal goods that lead to Catholic school identity or pursuing legitimacy that will grant the external goods the school needs to survive. Catholic school identity therefore flourishes and fades over time as these leaders navigate the choppy waters of global social trends, market competition, and fickle policy environments. Those principals and schools that are able to satisfy their need for external goods while simultaneously understanding Catholic education as the practice of developing virtuous adults are the most likely to maintain their Catholic school identity.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I describe the methods I used to study how one particular school builds, maintains, and communicates its Catholic school identity. In my first chapter, I described how the stated purposes of the schools (namely, beatitude) might affect research based on different assumptions (such as academic achievement). In my second chapter, I developed a definition of Catholic school identity and used organizational theory to describe how identity might affect a school's operation. These theoretical arguments are valuable for understanding Catholic school identity, but an empirical study of a real school helps to contextualize them.

I conducted a qualitative study of the identity of one Catholic elementary school, Sacred Heart Academy (a pseudonym). Identity is a challenging concept to study because it exists objectively of any individual member of the school community, but it exists *because* of the subjective perceptions of those individuals. As a result of these complex and dynamic interactions between subjectivity and objectivity, the best methodological approach was to conduct deep interviews with a small number of subjects (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Some data came from publicly available documents such as the school's vision statement (Appendix D) and curriculum, which I collected prior to the interviews and used as a source of questioning. By interviewing several subjects who occupy different roles in the Sacred Heart community - principal, teacher, parent, priest, and Archdiocesan official - I was able to use these different perspectives to gain a deeper understanding of the school's Catholic identity.

Because people have potentially divergent beliefs about the identity of Sacred Heart, including people who are not explicitly part of the school community, the data for this study focus on the phenomenon of the Catholic identity of Sacred Heart, not on a broader understanding of Sacred Heart as an institution. A “case study” would require both a more complete study of Sacred Heart as its unit of analysis, and a clearer boundary around the case than makes sense for a study of identity, which extends beyond the school’s boundaries into the beliefs and perceptions of outsiders, such as Archdiocesan and parish officials. Therefore, I did not conduct a “case study,” but rather a “qualitative interview study” that gained methodological focus in exchange for a broader unit of analysis.

This methodology chapter seeks to answer three key questions (Maxwell, 2005). The first is, “What will we know after this study that we didn’t know before?” All of the empirical data of this study relate to the identity of Sacred Heart, so we know more about the Catholic identity of this particular school. We know more about this school’s attempts to build a coherent school community, and about its efforts to maintain identity in the face of external and internal forces. And we know more about how leaders in the school perceive its identity and use those perceptions to inform their decisions.

The second key question is, “Why are these answers worth knowing?” The target audience for this research is anyone who uses Catholic school identity as a motivation for their decisions, including educators and administrators in Catholic schools, whether they themselves are Catholic or not. The answers to these research questions should help these leaders make more informed, and therefore more effective decisions.

The third key question is, “How will we know the conclusions are valid?” In a qualitative context, validity is better understood as credibility, both of the empirical data and of the theoretical claims that I abstract from them. No research can ever be entirely free of bias, but I describe below the methodological and epistemological choices I made to gain the reader’s trust in the answers to these research questions.

I begin this chapter by describing the concepts that informed the research questions, followed by the theories that provided potential answers; empirical findings that either contrast with or reinforce these predicted answers are the source of significant findings for this study. I then describe the methods that allow me to answer these questions, including justifications for using a qualitative interview study, site and participant selection, and data collection methods. Finally, I describe my plans for analyzing these data and more fully argue for the validity and potential significance of these findings for Catholic schools.

Conceptual Framework

Catholic schools are organizations, so Catholic school identity is a form of organizational identity: a series of claims about what an organization is or is not. When organizations approach decisions that don’t have predetermined outcomes, they must ask themselves hard questions about their purpose, about what is central, distinct, and enduring about the organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985). For a school, centrality often depends on a shared sense of purpose or a school culture (Bryk, Lee & Holland, 1993), and distinction requires a functional community that includes and necessitates the school (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987).

Catholic school identity is therefore a collection of claims about what is central, distinct, and enduring about Catholic schools as communities of purpose. Catholic schools have existed in the United States for well over a century (Gross, 2018) and Catholic education has its roots in the first scholastic universities of medieval Europe (Boland, 2012), giving these schools particular claims of enduring identity. What is distinct about Catholic schools is their connection to the Catholic intellectual tradition, and therefore their commitment to developing students' virtue in pursuit of beatitude (Maritain, 1943). This virtue takes as its motivation an *Imago Dei* anthropology that suggests that beatitude is difficult but accessible to all, given appropriate instruction (Groome, 1996), and manifests in the practices, rituals, symbols, and curricula that are uniquely Catholic (Convey, 2012).

Virtue in pursuit of beatitude is therefore the narrative Catholic schools tell to make sense of the individual actions they pursue. MacIntyre's theory of practice is valuable for understanding this connection in two respects. First, he explicitly connects narratives to traditions, describing in detail how the moral language of tradition is necessary for an objective (i.e. external to the individual) understanding of concepts like *true* and *good* (MacIntyre, 1988). Second, he describes how modern individuals and institutions can recreate the type of integrated moral landscape that was more prevalent in the past, by participating in "practices," social activities that draw individuals out of self-imposed moral frameworks in search of goods internal to the practice (MacIntyre, 1981). These internal goods are central, distinct, and enduring in a community of practice, and so are connected to the identity of organizations. But these internal goods must exist in a balance with the external goods that are necessary for the survival of institutions, such as money and legitimacy.

Organizational theory provides a theoretical framework for organizations' decision making as they attempt to balance internal and external goods. One purpose of organizational identity is to build legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Catholic schools' legitimacy derives from comparison to other schools. Institutions in an organizational field can build legitimacy through competence, but a key idea in organizational theory is that legitimacy is somewhat irrational, based on stakeholders' expectations rather than objective standards of efficiency (Rowan & Miskel, 1999). The desire for legitimacy then leads to isomorphism, a homogenization of organizations to a single or a few closely related models (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). If the models are non-Catholic schools, then such isomorphism pressures Catholic schools *not* to develop or maintain a uniquely Catholic identity.

Given isomorphic pressures in a well-defined field, significant policy change becomes unlikely as inertia overwhelms the desire for change. However, change does occur, even in these fields. One model organizational theory uses to understand such change is Kingdon's policy streams model, in which change occurs when several factors align: there must be a problem that instigates the need for change, there must be a pre-existing policy that offers a potential solution, and there must be political actors willing to serve as policy entrepreneurs to shepherd the policy to fruition (Kingdon, 2003). In this model, the policy is not the result of a rational, deliberate, thoughtful process, but rather has been selected from a "garbage can" or "primordial soup" of pre-written policies all waiting for a problem they could potentially solve. But without these pre-existing policies, policy entrepreneurs would run out of political capital by the time the window for change slams shut.

Members in a community of practice must intentionally balance the desire for a central and distinct identity against the necessity for legitimacy that draws the organization towards more homogenized models. In Catholic schools, the responsibility for this balance falls largely on the decisions of the principal, but the actual enactment of identity is found in the practice of teachers (Hobbie, Convey & Schuttlöffel, 2010). Some schools are “tightly coupled,” in that the decisions of leadership have a significant impact on the practice of teachers, while other schools are “loosely coupled,” in that teachers are protected from the decisions of leadership by a collection of routines and rituals that make direct change difficult (Spillane, Parise & Sherer, 2011). In this study, I will consider how each of these concepts in organizational theory - legitimacy, isomorphism, tight and loose coupling, buffering of organizational routines - affects the identity of the school and the decisions of school leadership.

Research Questions

In the conceptual framework above, I defined Catholic school identity as a shared sense of purpose that is central, distinct, and enduring because it connects to a particular Catholic anthropology and manifests in the particular practices of a Catholic school. I then described how organizational theory predicts that perceptions of this identity will be in tension with both the desire for and the necessity of external goods such as legitimacy, and that the practices of identity will be mediated through organizational routines that either strongly or loosely couple the actions of practitioners with the goals of leaders. All three

research questions derive from this conceptual framework and combine to investigate a coherent manifestation of Catholic school identity at one specific school.

Question 1: How do the members of the Sacred Heart Academy school community perceive its Catholic school identity?

Different members of the Sacred Heart school community perceive differently what is central, distinct, and enduring about the school. The school's identity as an organization is strengthened if many diverse participants in the school community have similar conceptions of Catholic school identity; these conceptions reflect the similarity or diversity of community members' claims of the school's purpose. This assessment of the relative strength of Sacred Heart's identity will be valuable, particularly in order to identify which aspects of the school participants associate with strong Catholic school identity.

Question 2: How do their perceptions of identity affect, and how are they affected by, leaders' and educators' decisions?

Perceptions of identity are the source of goals, and goals motivate individual practices and decisions. Reciprocally, these practices and decisions can then form and motivate the school's culture and identity. By considering both community members' perceptions of identity (from question 1) and their self-described motivations for decisions, this study aims to clarify the process these leaders and educators use to connect identity and practice. In the theory of practice, these motivations derive from larger narratives, which allow individual members' perceptions of identity to coalesce into a unified organizational identity.

Question 3: What challenges does Sacred Heart encounter in maintaining its Catholic school identity?

Legitimacy is a challenge that the Sacred Heart school community encounters as it attempts to maintain a distinct identity. Organizational theory connects legitimacy to isomorphic pressures; both decisions made by leaders and perceptions of community members can stem from connections to model organizations. Another challenge this theory predicts is translating the desires of leadership into the actions of practitioners, particularly actions informed by organizational routines that may buffer them from changing in response to leaders' decisions.

These three questions are rooted in the conceptual framework above; both MacIntyre's theory of practice and organizational theory describe potential pathways to their answers. Building a study around these questions allows the experiences and beliefs of this particular community to talk back to these theories and clarify the nature of Catholic school identity in practice. The core "issue" at study is the Catholic identity of the Sacred Heart school community, and these questions exist entirely to serve a more complete understanding of that issue.

Methodology

Each of the questions above is qualitative in nature, in that they ask not about quantifiable data, but rather about the essential character of the construct of identity, *i.e.* its "quality" (Kvale, 1996). These question types are most appropriate for this kind of research

because I am not attempting to evaluate the effectiveness of a particular school structure or educational system, but to explore identity as a lived experience, as a subjective understanding (Seidman, 2006). This approach stands in contrast to previous research on Catholic education, which has often investigated positive standards of effectiveness. The research on this “Catholic school effect” (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2005; Kim & Frees, 2006; Altonji, Elder & Taber, 2005; Freeman & Berends, 2016) has been primarily quantitative, with researchers asking whether Catholic schools had a measurable effect on particular constructs, such as test scores or graduation rates. But as I argued in my first chapter, these quantitative approaches make assumptions about the purpose of Catholic education that may miss particular qualities of Catholic institutions.

Instead, the above research questions are best addressed by a qualitative methodology whose purpose is to leverage subjective experiences to better make sense of the dynamic characteristics of an objective phenomenon (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). This approach does not prevent hypothesizing and methodological production of scientific knowledge (Kvale, 1996, p. 90); indeed, both the theory of practice and organizational theory imply predictions of individual school community members’ beliefs and practices. Instead, a qualitative approach is superior for these questions because extended interviews are better than surveys at identifying subjective motives and constructed meanings of human behavior (Kvale, 1996, p. 72). These qualitative methods will allow me to investigate causal links that are too complex for experimentation or survey research (Childers, 2012).

Perhaps the most common qualitative methodology is the case study, and I seriously considered designing this study as a case study but decided against it. Case studies investigate “bounded systems” (Stake, 1995, p. 2), and Sacred Heart Academy as a school could indeed be considered a bounded system. I could then use an instrumental case study, which primarily uses the case as an opportunity to study an “issue” that is not the bounded system itself, such as identity (p. 16). However, I want to be more open to different interpretations of identity, which would point more to an intrinsic case study than an instrumental one. And this leads to a problem, since I also want to investigate the construct of Sacred Heart's identity as perceived by many diverse types of people who might not neatly fit within the “bounded system” of Sacred Heart Academy, such as Archdiocesan officials.

Instead, I conducted a qualitative interview study, which has less formal boundaries around the unit of analysis and restricts itself to interviews as the primary source of data. I did use some basic documents, such as Sacred Heart's mission and vision statements and the Sacred Heart curriculum plan, as the impetus for questions, and as a point of comparison against which I can triangulate interview data. For example, I asked subjects about aspects of the school's stated mission and compared their answers both to each other and to the stated goals in the written document. I also collected data from a published interview given by the former principal of the school, and I used it to frame my questions to her.

Qualitative interview studies have potential limitations, particularly because they are susceptible to over-privileging language talk, narratives, and what can be said versus

practices that are difficult to articulate. Other qualitative methodologies, not only including case studies but also ethnographies, attempt to address these concerns by supplementing interview data with on-site observations, but I decided against an ethnographic approach for two reasons. First, my lived experience as a member of the Sacred Heart community (as I discuss in more detail below) means I already had access to on-site observations in a non-researcher context, giving me instant appreciation for whether interview answers were likely to be valid or not. And second, the privileging of narratives corresponded well with the conceptual framework of this study being rooted in MacIntyrean thought, which also privileges narratives as a sense making mechanism.

Weiss (1994) identified several reasons for conducting a qualitative interview study, and the reasons most salient for this research are integrating multiple perspectives, developing holistic description, and bridging intersubjectivities (p. 9-10). Because this study makes sense of diverse community members' perceptions of a shared concept and to abstract those perspectives onto the concept of identity in the context of Sacred Heart, I believe a qualitative interview study was the best approach.

Site and Participant Selection

Sacred Heart Academy is a pseudonym for a particular K-8 elementary school in a suburb of a large metropolitan area in the United States that has a reputation as a school with a strong Catholic identity. Sacred Heart uses a "classical curriculum" model that centers history and religion, which not only helps distinguish it from public schools but also from other Catholic schools. This classical curriculum is based on the ideas of Dorothy

Sayers, a British novelist and amateur medieval scholar who advocated for an education system similar in some ways to medieval scholastic liberal education, but also with attention to certain aspects of mid-century developmental psychology (Sayers, 1947; Richardi, 2023; Leithart, 2008). According to the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education, no other elementary school in Sacred Heart's Archdiocese has this kind of classical Catholic curriculum, or the explicit attention to including the Catholic intellectual tradition across all subjects, a key component of Catholic school identity (Convey, 2012). The school is significantly integrated into the surrounding community, but it also attracts families and students from outside areas. In addition, Sacred Heart Academy's student population is both racially and socioeconomically diverse, which helped to alleviate the potential confounding role that intersecting student identities may play in the formation of Catholic school identity.

Note here that my justification for selecting Sacred Heart Academy as the site of study is based in large part on the reputation of the school, defined here as public perception of the school as an institution. In this way, reputation is closely connected to legitimacy, which might be understood as the depth of positive reputation. So the study of legitimacy that is so central to this study's conceptual framework relies in no small part on the reputation of the school, and a reputation that helped draw me to study this school at all. The potential exists here for circular reasoning - I study a school with a strong reputation only to discover that its reputation is strong - but there is significant evidence that the reputation of the school exists independent of my perceptions. In particular, the school is now significantly oversubscribed, with far more applications from families than the school has seats. These families apply to the school based on the school's reputation

(and legitimacy), which I discuss extensively in Chapter 5, and is the product of perceptions and conversations in the community that are not yet explicit. Part of my goal in this dissertation is to identify and therefore make explicit the sources of this reputation.

Sacred Heart was an early adopter of the classical curriculum model, and several of the teachers and administrators who promulgated the school's change from a conventional parish Catholic school to a classical curriculum are still connected to the school. Accessing these stakeholders' perspectives gave valuable insight into this transition as a policy change, which provides evidence for salient answers to the research questions. Further, because the classical curriculum is still new to many prospective parents, the school's curriculum documents describe the classical curriculum explicitly in contrast to other curriculum models, giving direct access not only to curriculum policy but the reasoning behind these policies. Precisely because Sacred Heart recently underwent such a significant policy change, and therefore was compelled to foreground and consider issues of identity, Sacred Heart Academy is the ideal site for a study of Catholic school identity.

As I describe in my positionality statement (Appendix A), I am not a neutral party. Part of the reason I selected Sacred Heart Academy as the appropriate site for this dissertation research was because I have significant personal connections to the school; I am myself not only a Catholic school educator at a nearby school, but I am the parent of two students at Sacred Heart Academy. In a positivistic sense, these connections have the opportunity to cause bias, and indeed I mitigated this bias somewhat by eliminating my childrens' teachers from the pool of possible interview subjects. But just as importantly, my connections to the school granted me access, not only to interview subjects, but also to core

conceptions of identity that these subjects may not have been as willing to share to a researcher less connected to the school; essentially, my experience as researcher was improved because of the implicit trust I gained from these interview subjects. That trust was not an expectation that I would not criticize the school; indeed, my internal access gave me the warrant to criticize the school in ways less embedded researchers might not be able to recognize. And my emic perspective allowed me to instantly assess the validity of subjects' claims, in a way that benefited the credibility of the study and contributed to the authenticity of its claims.

The research questions ask about the perceptions of the Sacred Heart Academy school community, so I interviewed diverse participants in the school community. Namely, I interviewed the principal, four teachers, and five parents. I also interviewed the former principal who brought the classical curriculum to Sacred Heart in 2010. In addition, I interviewed the pastor of Sacred Heart Parish, in which the school is located, and the assistant superintendent for the Archdiocese in charge of the K-8 curriculum. Because the phenomenon of study is the product of dynamic interactions between individual subjects, deep interviews with a small sample are more likely to elicit the thematic strands necessary for understanding it (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). These diverse interview subjects provide multiple, well-informed perspectives on the Catholic school identity at Sacred Heart Academy.

I interviewed the principal of the school because his perspective is of a decision maker who must negotiate the interactions between the necessities of operating a nonprofit business (*i.e.* external goods) with the maintenance of Catholic school identity. I

interviewed teachers because they interact with both the principal on one side and students on the other, making them important mediators of school identity. I interviewed parents because their perspective is somewhat that of an outsider, as they are not in the school building daily, but they also chose to participate in the school's community when they enrolled their children at the school. I interviewed the former principal to gain insight on the curricular change that precipitated a significant reassessment of the interaction between Sacred Heart as a school and its student body, making her a particularly influential voice in the creation and maintenance of the identity of the school. I interviewed the parish pastor because the school exists in his purview, and therefore its Catholic identity depends on its interaction with the parish he shepherds. I interviewed an Archdiocesan official because the school is under the educational purview of the Department of Education of the Archdiocese, and decisions made by Archdiocesan officials have significant bearing on decisions made by school leadership.

To begin, I contacted the principal of Sacred Heart, and he agreed both to be interviewed and to allow me to study the identity of the school. I then communicated my proposed methodology to the IRB and received approval, and at the principal's request, I also received approval from the Archdiocese, on the condition that study publications keep the school's and diocese's identity anonymous.

Once I received these approvals, I reached out to the principal via email, and included the recruitment letter (Appendix C) and consent form (Appendix B) I constructed for the IRB. He agreed to a virtual interview. I also at that time reached out to the pastor, Archdiocesan official, and a prominent school parent, and scheduled interviews with them

as well, using the same methods. At the end of my interview with the principal, I asked him to suggest several teachers that he believes would be willing to be interviewed (*i.e.* snowball sampling), and he suggested four. I then reached out to these teachers and scheduled interviews with each of them, three of them virtual and one in person. I also conducted similar snowball sampling at the end of my interview with the prominent parent, who suggested interviews with four additional parents. I reached out to these parents and scheduled interviews with each of them, all four virtual. During the data collection period, only one potential research subject declined an interview.

Interviews with all of these diverse subjects specifically address research questions 1 and 3, in which I consider these community members' perceptions of Catholic school identity, and I consider the challenges they identify as meaningful for the development of this identity. But the interviews with those who actually implemented the new curriculum, including current and past principals and teachers, were the most important for answering research question 2 regarding the connection between perceptions of identity and the decisions these leaders and educators made in 2010 and continue to make today. It also gave me an opportunity to ask the principal which community members would offer insight into this history, giving this study the organic connection to the community that comes with snowball sampling (Childers, 2012, p. 41), as well as more direct access to insightful interview subjects.

Data Collection

The purpose of this section is to describe how the interviews collected data that is potentially valuable for answering the research questions; the purpose of the next section will be how I used these data to actually answer the questions. First, these methods were intentionally flexible and I adjusted them as I learned more about the community and its perceptions of identity, but the general principles remained consistent throughout the study. Further, I conducted a pilot interview (Maxwell, 2005) with the principal of another Catholic school in the area. His similar situation to the main subjects of this study made him a perfect subject for a pilot study that indicated to me the strengths and weaknesses of the methods I describe here.

To begin, I designed an interview protocol individually for each subject based on their particular role and their connection to the school community (Appendix F). This protocol was not a structured interview, but rather was “semi-structured” and served as a prompt rather than as a script (Weiss, 1994). Designing the interview in this way allowed me to follow the flow of the conversation in order to gain an accurate account of the subject’s constructed perceptions of identity without superimposing my own framework onto them, but still to remain focused on the topic at hand. The questions I did write ahead of time were based on several sources: prior research conducted on Catholic school identity, documents such as the mission statement, and for later interviews, other subjects’ perceptions of identity. Each question centered on one of the three research questions and asked about a connection between either the theory of practice or organizational theory with respect to the research question. Finally, I sent the interview protocol to each subject

ahead of time, so they could consider their responses and never feel imposed upon or negatively surprised during the interview (Childers, 2012).

Semi-structured interviews were most appropriate given the co-constructed nature of interviews about identity (Seidman, 2006). Using interviews of this type allows the researcher the freedom to take the interview where the subject believes it should go (Weiss, 1994), without losing the ability to test hypotheses and approach subjective topics with scientific rigor (Kvale, 1996). Interview subjects might have strong conceptions of their own identity, but may not have articulated these conceptions before, implying that the interview is less about “mining” the subject for information that already exists within them and needs to be “extracted,” but rather that the subject and the interviewer are both collectively “exploring” the contested field of identity together, with the interviewer serving the role of sounding board and neutral arbiter for the subject’s nascent articulations of his or her own identity (Seidman, 2006). This approach often led to extended, coherent narrative descriptions, and I believe the resulting long-form quotes add veracity to the thick description I can provide to these subjects’ identity constructions in the findings chapter below.

In order to answer the research questions, I designed interview questions carefully, according to frameworks that orient the answers towards the research questions. The most basic such framework is that “any question is a good question if it directs the respondent to material needed by the study in a way that makes it easy for the respondent to provide the material” (Weiss, 1994, p. 73). More specifically, I began each interview with short, factual questions to build momentum and establish rapport (Lortie, 1975); indeed concrete details

are valuable throughout the interview (Weiss, 1994) as I ask subjects to reconstruct events rather than remember (Seidman, 2006). The goal was to write short questions that encourage long answers (Kvale, 1996), *i.e.* to “listen more, talk less” (Seidman, 2006). Each research question mapped onto several interview questions (Kvale, 1996), with each question respecting and inquiring about the participant as a subject who is in the process of constructing meaning rather than as an object events have happened to (Seidman, 2006).

Several types of questions were available for me to use, and I believe a diversity of question types helped me investigate research questions with both creativity and efficiency. Merriam (1998) encourages four main question types: hypotheticals (“If x were to happen, how would you respond?”), devil’s advocate (“Some people would say that... How would you respond to them?”), ideal position (“What would a perfect x look like?”), and interpretive (“How did you understand x?”), and she discourages multi-part questions, leading questions, and yes-or-no questions. Becker (1998) suggests using “how” questions as a more accessible way to ask the more difficult “why” questions. Lortie (1975) demonstrates open-ended questions (“If you had 10 extra work hours, how would you spend them?”) and equal choices (“Some teachers say..., others say... Which do you agree with?”). He also suggests setting up positive questions (“What does a good teaching day look like?”) before negative ones (“What have you regretted doing?”) in order to build trust. Kvale (1996) has a more extensive list, identifying nine types of questions: introducing, follow-up, probing, specifying, direct, indirect, structuring, silent, and interpreting questions (p. 133-135), while Seidman (2006) focuses on asking participants to tell a story, with themselves as a character, and with explicit attention to the differences between private, personal, and public experiences.

As I conducted the interviews, I continuously interpreted and tried to understand the subjects' answers from their perspectives, and to ensure validity, I verified these interpretations with the subject in real time (Kvale, 1996, p. 145), a process that supplements member checking that I conducted after the analysis of each interview. These verifications fall under the category of "follow-up questions," of which Weiss (1994) identifies six types: extending, filling in detail, identifying actors, consulting with others, inner events, and making indications explicit (p. 75-76). But I kept in mind that meaning is being constructed in the interview itself, which indicates that I shouldn't "probe" for facts that have not yet been uncovered, but rather "explore" with the subject their perceptions of the concept of identity (Seidman, 2006). Together, these question types form a flexible yet rigorous framework I used to develop interview protocols and extemporaneous questions that, as Weiss claimed above, "make it easy for the respondent to provide the material."

As I describe in the schedule of interviews (Appendix E), I started the interview process by collecting data from as diverse a set of participants as possible, interviewing six stakeholders from six different roles for each of the first six interviews. Using this schedule exposed me to each role and how the role affected the interview process before I conducted a second interview in the same role. This process allowed me to consider the incoming data and how I can use it to improve interview protocols going forward, and to design those interview protocols to match emergent codes and preliminary analysis. By conducting the interviews in this way, I more efficiently used the interviews that I did conduct, which allowed the data to reach theoretical saturation, and therefore conclude data collection. Once I collected data from all interviews, I then turned my attention entirely to data analysis.

Data Analysis

Once I collected interview data from Sacred Heart's principal, teachers, parents, and other community members, I used these data to answer the research questions. By “analysis” I mean exactly this process of making sense of the data in light of the research questions (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall & McCulloch, 2011). That sense-making process involves several important steps such as coding, categorizing, and abstracting, but the main purpose of the analysis process is to understand through explanation (Stake, 1995). I conducted a “memoing” step at the conclusion of each interview to identify the key points of interest that derived from the interviews; these memos were a first draft of analysis and an important source for the iterative improvement of data collection. I note also that analysis was not a separate step, but rather happened simultaneously to data collection, in order to continuously improve data collection and to progressively move closer to valid, empirical answers to the research questions (Merriam, 1998; Kvale, 1996).

Because I was interacting with the concept of an identity, which fits Stake’s (1995) definition of an “issue” rather than a “case” (p. 16), I used what Weiss (1994) calls “issue-focused analysis” (p. 153). This analytical method has five steps: coding/abstracting, sorting, local integration, inclusive integration, and verification. Coding is the process of separating collected data into categories according to various abstracted concepts that derive either from theory or are grounded only in the data. Because this is not a grounded theory study, I restricted my coding only to theoretical categories, rather than grounding categories solely in empirical data.

Codes are a tool for comparing data across interviews, not findings or analysis in themselves, so the process of coding is an early step in the process of sense making. I began by coding the data in three concentric cycles, as recommended by Saldana (2009). The first cycle organized the data based on the research questions and the previous studies of similar phenomena in the literature. The second cycle developed categories that reflected potential emergent themes. And the third cycle connected these categories to theory. In this way, coding moves from particular to abstract.

In the first coding cycle, I used concepts from the literature as deductive codes, such as internal and external goods, legitimacy and distinction, practice, and anthropology. Separating collected data into broad categories based on these concepts helped organize the data and prepare for potential triangulation of distinct explanatory threads. These categories reflected the purpose of the research, were both exhaustive and mutually exclusive, sensitized the analysis to explanation, and were conceptually congruent to existing theory (Merriam, 1998). Once the categories were developed, I then sorted the collected data into these categories, paying particular attention to any unexpected answers that did not easily fit into a theoretical or literature-backed category.

In the second coding cycle, I searched for commonalities between different answers within each broad category; these commonalities led to sub-categories and eventually themes (Saldana, 2009). This process corresponds to Weiss's (1994) component of "local integration," which develops connections across data within the same category. Once I developed these themes by finding commonalities within categories, I looked to connections between the categories; a process Weiss calls "inclusive integration." There

were connections between different subjects' approaches to legitimacy, and there were connections between different subjects' perceptions of the role of organizational routines in shaping how leadership decisions affect practice; these are themes that developed within categories. But then these themes can cross categories to answer the cause and effect questions between perceptions of identity and the decisions of leadership, or can identify multifaceted challenges perceived in different ways by different community members. In this way, these inclusively integrated themes helped to answer the research questions.

This process of using themes to answer the research questions directly is Saldana's (2009) third round of coding, but fits in between Weiss's components of inclusive integration and verification. For the verification step, he advocates for treating the answers to research questions as mini-theories and then testing those theories against the collected evidence in order to assess whether they are drawing valid explanations of the actual data. These theories attempt to explain the data, and are valuable in proportion to both their parsimony and scope (Merriam, 1998). Completing these three coding cycles and five analysis components helped to make sense of the data, tell a coherent story informed by the findings, and work towards a valid answer to the research questions.

Once the analysis was complete, I used the categories developed in the first round of coding as the titles of sections in my findings chapter, with the subthemes identified in the second round of coding as subsections. I then used the connections developed in the third round of coding to connect quotes from interview transcripts with each subtheme, and therefore created an outline of findings. Once this outline was in place, I used the connections developed in the analysis to write spot analysis of each quote and describe the

implicit narrative connecting the quotes to each other and to the themes and subthemes. With significant editorial collaboration with my advisor, I narrowed the scope of the findings to focus only on those subthemes that contributed directly to answering the research questions, which allowed the findings to more clearly contribute to the validity of the conclusions I then was able to draw in Chapter 5.

Validity

As social science research, this study pursues validity, or the internal consistency of its claims (Seidman, 2006). But as a qualitative study, validity is not about avoiding bias in the same way it would be for a quantitative study. Instead, I pursued in this study a criterion of “trustworthiness” or “credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which measures how well research findings correspond to reality (Merriam, 1998). I developed this sense of credibility by convincing the reader that I have presented a truthful accounting of these community members’ perceptions of Catholic school identity, and the best way to accomplish this goal was to “triangulate” by “using multiple sources of data... to confirm the emerging findings” (Merriam, 1998, p. 204). These validity measures correspond to a “post positivist” paradigm, in which triangulation is the procedure that establishes validity with regard to the researcher (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Because the evidence for my research claims is the perceptions of individuals, there could only be one source for each perception. But I could triangulate in the sense that the criterion of credibility asks for a holistic understanding rather than a technological solution for ensuring validity (Merriam, 1998). Specifically, I asked multiple related but

independent questions approaching the same subject's perceptions from multiple perspectives, and I specifically asked subjects about alternative explanations for their answers. These processes correspond to what Stake (1995) calls "theoretical triangulation" (p. 113). Finally, I debriefed my analysis strategies with my advisor, a form of peer debriefing that ensures interpretations are grounded in the evidence (Houghton et. al, 2013). These multiple approaches to and multiple perceptions of the singular concept of Catholic school identity allowed me to represent the analysis with credibility.

Besides credibility, other criteria for qualitative research include transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability is the ability of the research to generalize to theory and depends on the robustness of the connections I can make between the data collected and the theories abstracted in the analysis. Transferable claims are presented in sufficient detail that the readers can decide for themselves whether the conclusions apply in a different context (Shenton, 2004). Dependability is the consistency of the research in other contexts, and is similar to the quantitative criterion of reliability. I elevated this study's dependability by member checking to ensure the data was collected clearly, by keeping clear records during data collection, by closely following all IRB protocols, and by reporting data clearly and thoroughly (Houghton et. al, 2013; Childers, 2012).

Finally, confirmability is a demonstration that findings come from data rather than from researcher predispositions (Shenton, 2004). This criterion is particularly important because of my own connection to the topic at hand; not only am I a Catholic educator who cares deeply about Catholic school identity, but I am myself a member of the Sacred Heart

community as the parent of two students there. I am and will continue to be open about my positionality in this study, and I know that it is not sufficient simply to acknowledge subjectivity, nor is it sufficient to claim objectivity (Appendix A). “Untamed subjectivity mutes the emic voice” (Peshkin, 1988, p. 21), so I intentionally and explicitly attended to others’ perspectives. In this way, I systematically sought out subjectivity, not to eliminate it, but to “tame” it. “Subjectivity can be seen as virtuous for it is the basis of researchers’ making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected” (p. 18).

The potential that I fell short in this goal of “taming” my researcher subjectivity is one of several limitations to this study. Like many qualitative studies, this study is limited in its ability to generalize to other schools and other contexts. The data of the study has been watered down by the (quite reasonable) need for confidentiality, as doing so eliminates Sacred Heart's particular context and history in a discussion of its identity, at least in the final report. And for practical reasons, I was not able to include the voices of perhaps the most important participants in school identity: the students. I worked consistently to mitigate these limitations to the best of my ability, but I also recognize that no empirical research is without limitations, and so I believe despite these shortcomings, this study will make a significant contribution to the research on Catholic school identity.

Limitations

This study is a qualitative interview study, which has many strengths and advantages as a methodology for answering these particular research questions. However,

the choice of this methodology also comes with some limitations. First, since this was not intended to be a case study, I did not combine interview data with extensive documentary analysis or on-site observations of the school. This decision allowed me to focus on subjects' perspectives in a study of identity as a concept, but it foreclosed some opportunities for triangulation of interview findings. Second, this study is missing a significant source of data for understanding its identity: the perspective of students. I chose to exclude students because Sacred Heart is an elementary school; the students are young children and their youth would significantly complicate the process of recruiting and consent, while simultaneously mitigating the saliency of their perspectives.

Third, the sample size of this interview study could never be sufficient to achieve a comprehensive understanding of identity, even of identity at Sacred Heart. Because identity, including related concepts like legitimacy, is a concept rooted in the perceptions of people in a community, the ideal study would interview every person in that community, including those who live in the local neighborhood but do not attend the school. This study inevitably missed some of these perspectives, but my intention was to interview a diverse array of subjects to minimize this loss of validity. Finally, Sacred Heart has many characteristics that made it an ideal site for the study of Catholic identity, but many of those defining characteristics - classical curriculum, recent curricular change, etc. - may reduce how effectively the conclusions of this study can be generalized to other schools. Many of the findings about identity at Sacred Heart could apply to other schools across the Catholic educational space, but there certainly are some findings that lose saliency for other schools, and therefore reduce this study's ability to generalize, both to other populations, and to theory.

Significance

Catholic school identity is simultaneously crucial to the existence of a Catholic school as a community, and under-appreciated by many for its role in creating these communities (Convey, 2012). As such, I believe that this study will help develop the theory of Catholic school identity in service of researchers studying Catholic schooling; I believe it will make a particular contribution in the connections between the theory of practice, organizational theory, and the nature of Catholic school identity. These theories provide expectations and potential answers to the research questions, and they were subject to scrutiny given the collected empirical data. Indeed, data that conflicted with or noticeably reinforced the predictions of these theories were particularly significant findings that could prompt a reassessment of these theoretical constructs themselves.

Perhaps the most important contributions will be to Catholic schools themselves, particularly to Catholic school leaders such as principals. These leaders and decision makers, as well as anyone particularly motivated to build an individual school's Catholic school identity, will be well served by an honest, clear-eyed view of one school's identity: how its many diverse participants perceive it, how it affects leadership decisions, and its challenges and constraints.

So this study aims to have a particular focus on Catholic schools; it has been an attempt to understand an important component of Catholic school communities through a theoretical lens that could help Catholic schools better understand themselves. By using these theories and these methods to help answer these questions, I believe that this study will be a valuable contribution to the field of research on Catholic education.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

As I defined in my conceptual framework, organizational identity is what is central, distinct, and enduring about an organization. Catholic school identity is what is central to the nature of Catholic schooling, what distinguishes it from other forms of school, and what has endured over time. Identity is also connected to education as a practice that pursues internal goods, in contrast to school as an institution, which must by necessity pursue external goods incidental to the practices that it sponsors.

Sacred Heart Academy has a particular expression of Catholic school identity that both connects it to and distinguishes it from other schools, even other Catholic schools. This identity has its roots in the school's claims to educating in the Catholic tradition, particularly by using a classical curriculum. Regardless, Sacred Heart, like any Catholic school, must overcome the challenges of identity creation, and must balance necessary external goods against a desire for strong Catholic identity. Responses in the following interviews provide insight into how the Sacred Heart community makes and understands this process of identity creation.

Below, I share the findings from 13 interviews with stakeholders at Sacred Heart Academy, including the principal, pastor, former principal, an Archdiocesan official, four teachers, and five parents. As I described in the methods section above, I have organized responses into categories that arose both from the literature on Catholic school identity and from the themes that arose in the interviews themselves. I then connected the interview transcripts to specific themes and subthemes, and then used this chapter to show the

connections between quotes and each other, between quotes and themes, and between themes and the research questions. The resulting discussion of and between each quote is intended to connect the quotes and themes to the conclusions I will then draw in Chapter 5 as I use the evidence I present here to address and answer the research questions.

Community and Connection

Sacred Heart's organizational identity depends on stakeholders' shared understanding about what aspects of the organization are central, distinct, and enduring. One way, then, to strengthen the school's identity is to curate a school community comprised of families and teachers who already agree with the stated goals of the school. Such a prospect is far more likely in a private than a public school, but even for private schools, efforts to create community can be more or less intentional, authentic, and effective. Below, I report on the ways in which Sacred Heart intentionally builds its community, including cultivating interpersonal connections between community members, orienting itself to be of service to the broader community, and attracting new students and families, even those who live long distances from the school.

Building an Intentional Community

A key question for Sacred Heart was how to select its community members, both teachers (through hiring) and students (through admissions). Since the school is oversubscribed, leaders can set priorities and engage in some choice of who to accept. The

principal ultimately decides who is and is not accepted to the school, so his perspective on this issue is important for understanding the school's identity. He described this process as finding a "match" between the school's values and the family's:

So as we take people through the admissions process, we're trying to see, are you a good match for our school? And is our school a good match for your family? Are you seeking us for the intrinsic reasons of why we open our doors every day? And if we have a match, then great, let's hope we have space for your child. (Principal)

From the principal's perspective, the school uses its admissions decisions to build a community that shares the same values and "intrinsic reasons" for learning. But which values, exactly, remain open to interpretation and debate. For example, the Sacred Heart pastor prioritized whether the incoming families are Catholic:

We're a Catholic school and we try to find Catholic students. Or people who share our vision... And so just trying to find a family to share that vision. And all other balancing that needs to be done with enrollment. (Pastor)

But the pastor also insisted that the school be open to non-Catholic families, particularly those who are committed to participating fully in the community:

We celebrate our [founding] feast on September 30th. One of the men, fathers of the school, is not Catholic, but he made the spaghetti dinner. This is his second big event volunteering thing. We have a number of families who aren't Catholic, but they're active in the Parent Volunteer Corps. (Pastor)

The principal focused on families who are likely to participate in the community in the long run, not only because they value what the school values, but also because families who participate in an enduring way are likely to contribute to the school's health as an institution:

When you have a family that's bought into the mission, regardless of whatever their financial status is, if they're high, low or middle income, it doesn't matter; when they're bought into the mission, they're going to be generous with the future growth of the school to the degree that they can and that's all you're really asking for it, is that people support your overall growth and support where the school is heading, and it'll be matched because their heart is aligned to what you're trying to do and they want and desire that for their children. (Principal)

The concept of “match” implies that because different families have different value systems, and different schools have different value systems, the strength of a school's identity derives from the correspondence between the school's particular value system and the families that comprise its population. Catholic schools, as private schools, have an advantage in this matching mechanism because families intentionally choose to join or not join the school community, albeit for varied reasons. But even so, these families and schools may “match” with each other for different reasons, complicating the connection between such a match and the development of school identity.

Teachers, too, consider the school's value system when making their choices of where to apply. One teacher described the benefit of this shared sense of purpose:

The great thing about our faculty is that... the administration and also our pastor, we all come from the same place: that faith-filled place, knowing that what we are giving and arming these children with is something that we all have in common. The commonality of that flows from the top and then it intrinsically goes into the classroom and from there from the teachers and whom they meet throughout their day in the building, structure and what have you, it's something very authentic. It's not something that can be made up. It's something that is lived, something that is seen and something that I witness every single day. (Teacher 4)

This teacher is referencing the Catholic identity that not only comes from the religious backgrounds of the pastor, principal, and teachers but also comes from the unity of purpose, *i.e.* "something that we all have in common." The evidence I collected from these stakeholders matches this assessment, that the administration and faculty of Sacred Heart shares a consistent Catholic identity, and that identity is supported and maintained by explicit attention to it from the principal. But the evidence I collected also noted that students and families are much more diverse in their religious beliefs and their participation in Catholic identity than are the teachers. So Teacher 4's assessment is truthful, but I note here that she does not include students and families in the "we" who have Catholic identity in common.

Each of these measures - admissions, faculty selection, and event planning - help construct a community, and contribute to a publicly understandable conception of the identity of Sacred Heart as a school. This identity is clearly Catholic, which has the

potential to dissuade non-Catholic families from participating (a topic I discuss in more detail below). But those in the community recognized as legitimate the school's ability to set these priorities, as long as it was transparent about them. One parent explained:

I appreciate when businesses and services and schools and stuff are just out there with this is who we are, so that there's no confusion. I think it's annoying when people are like we can be anything you want, so I appreciate their identity is out there and obvious. But I think some people would be like, I don't want that, which is fine. I think that's good. That means they won't come, and then that's better for the culture to stay. (Parent 4)

This same parent described the culture of the school as strong enough to absorb non-Catholic students and families, implying that the strength of identity is determined by shared values, including shared cultural values, among stakeholders. The implication is that a certain level of diversity is good, but that at a certain point the level of diversity dilutes the school's ability to maintain a strong cultural identity. As the same parent continued:

That's another thing is I actually do think that the Sacred Heart net is strong enough and wide enough that I do actually hope a lot of either non-Catholics or non-practicing Catholics come, because I think that our culture is not fragile at Sacred Heart. I think it's something that could really bring kids up. The rising tide raises all ships. I think it'd be really good for kids to come there having not had a lot of theology or formation because I think kids would leave better. So I don't think that it's fragile enough to be like, we only

can allow people to come who are super Catholic and exactly like us. I don't think that. I really like that there's a variety of backgrounds and I think that our culture is strong enough to support that, which is good. (Parent 4)

This parent voiced her opinion that because it was a self-selected community, the families that chose to participate were at least amenable to Catholic values and to the religious formation of their children. As long as Sacred Heart is upfront about its values, no family who chooses to be a part of it would then feel excluded. But in general, the perception in the Sacred Heart community is one of shared values, which leads to a sense of belonging. One teacher described what she sees:

When you look around just even at our children and the way they interact with each other from the youngest to the oldest, the way how the older children, they're always watching out and they're looking out for the younger students, the joy in the younger students' faces when they recognize and they pass in the hallways and they see the older students, the way that they're able to interact within each other and show that care kindness and love for each other. That shows exactly what we've been striving for. The children get it, and then it carries over into the families, the strong family community that we have within Sacred Heart as well. (Teacher 3)

The general perception among every Sacred Heart community member I spoke to, including those with criticisms, was of a positive, value-centered, interdependent community.

Must Teachers be Catholic to be Excellent?

I asked each teacher and parent whether teachers at Sacred Heart must be Catholic to be excellent teachers *at Sacred Heart*. The answers varied, and the differing reasons are revealing of the different priorities of the school's stakeholders. One teacher deflected the question away from whether the teachers *must be* Catholic to whether or not they *are* Catholic:

So, I know that they haven't all been. When I first came, we had excellent teachers who were Christian, I would say not Catholic, although one wasn't Christian... most were Catholic. But my impression is that now, all of the hires are Catholic, I'm pretty sure... I hear this one came out of the seminary, this one left the convent... So that might be considered more important now than it was in the past. Could be. But I'm not doing the hiring. (Teacher 1)

By answering my question of whether a teacher *must be* Catholic by whether or not the actual teachers *are* Catholic, this teacher implies that the value system of the community influences the value system of the individuals; if a sufficient ratio of teachers are Catholic, then the question of whether or not they *should be* Catholic is obviated because the values of the school become explicit.

I asked whether the explicit and implicit teaching about faith would make it difficult for a teacher to be non-Catholic. Some teachers hesitated and said that the only real requirement was to be a faithful Christian:

I don't think they necessarily have to be Catholic but I do think they need to be Christian to have a better full understanding of exactly where our history is coming from and we're going to help guide our children too because we have had some teachers there who are not Catholic, but they were very faith-filled. (Teacher 3)

One teacher pointed out that the particular knowledge of the Church might be a challenge for a teacher who isn't Catholic to fully embrace, or to gain purchase with the students:

That [teaching at Sacred Heart as a non-Catholic] might be a challenge. Here's what you also know, with what we bring in, the children are so knowledgeable about the faith. It's incredible what they know at such a young age. The stories that they know, the saints that they know. It's like somebody would be stepping into something forward. The children would know. They tell immediately. (Teacher 2)

But another teacher definitively answered no, that excellent Sacred Heart teachers don't even have to be Christian:

Absolutely not. We're called, it's a vocation, it's a ministry. So we have that same call, Christian or not, if you're Catholic or not, and if you're called to be a teacher, then you're going to be open to the graces that come with it. You don't have to. (Teacher 4)

This response implies that the value that might come from being a Catholic teacher isn't necessarily related to being Catholic per se, but rather comes from the individual teacher's value system and how well that individual fits in with the community. But neither of these responses answer whether being Catholic gives teachers any unique or particular access to this value system.

A parent I asked did address this question by answering that yes, she expected each of her children's teachers to be Catholic:

I hope that it would be really natural for the teacher to be an example of living a Catholic life. I hope it would be natural in that it was true. So just when the kids are little, you can really control what they know and what they hear and what they are exposed to. And as they get older, I really want them to be exposed to a lot more people and a lot more things, and it's just a very supportive reality when you know that they're going to school and the same values that we have at home are being reinforced in school. So I'm not big into keeping them in a bubble in all aspects, but when there's someone who's in their life every day and influencing them every day, it feels very supportive to know the questions they're asking and the way that they're sort of trying to understand the world. And as they grow up, especially in middle school, that there's teachers who are giving the kind of answers that I would agree with. It's just while we have control, which isn't very long in their life. But while we have control over what they're exposed to, I want them to be exposed to lots of different people who are validating that this is true, this is

good, and this is beautiful, and that this is a roadmap to live your life. And you've seen it, even you've experienced it and then when you get to choose it later we hope. (Parent 4)

This parent doesn't necessarily believe that only Catholic teachers can be excellent teachers, but rather that she only trusts Catholic teachers to provide the kind of holistic upbringing that she intends to provide her children. Unlike the previous two responses, this parent explicitly connects "Catholic" with a particular set of values (*i.e.* what is true, good, and beautiful), which is a connection that makes the most sense in a virtue-based system, such as Catholicism.

The same parent continued by explaining that the Catholic value system derives not from the school's perspective, attempting to hire Catholic teachers, but rather from the teachers' perspective, in that only Catholic teachers would find the school an attractive place to work:

I'm sure all the schools try to hire good teachers. I'm sure that's not what differentiates it, but I think somehow they just do get good teachers. I think the teachers are like, you just want to work there. It's funny. I know I've heard different little insights that when all the whole diocese is together, the Sacred Heart faculty kind of stands out as really trying to hold true to Catholic doctrine when there's a lot of push back among the Catholic school teachers from a lot of other schools. I think there is this sort of teacher culture that is really Catholic and really draws in good teachers. So I think that that's the first thing, is the teachers are really outstanding. (Parent 4)

The diocese is a collection of Catholic schools, and so the insight that Sacred Heart teachers stand out for their commitment to Catholic doctrine when in the company of other Catholic teachers indicates that, intentional or not, distinctions exist between Sacred Heart and other Catholic schools on some metric of “Catholicness.” Note that the existence of this metric implies a sense of what it means to be a “good” Catholic. This parent, in particular, correlates this metric with “holding true to Catholic doctrine.” And by answering with this insight to a question about the religiosity of teachers, this parent implies that (from her perspective) other Catholic schools have more non-Catholic teachers, and that such a school construction causes schools to fall at different points on the “Catholicness” metric. Whether these assumptions are empirically true is a future question for those studying Catholic school identity.

The differences in these answers reveal a difference in priorities. The first teacher emphasized the hiring process and how Sacred Heart as a school tends to attract people who not only are Catholic but who come from seminaries and convents, and who therefore have extraordinary depth of faith. The second teacher emphasized the “call” and “graces” that she believes are accessible to all people of good will, and therefore concludes that teachers do not have to be Catholic to be successful at Sacred Heart. But in the parent’s response, we see a connection between these graces and the identity of the school as a virtue-centered community.

School Facilitates Interpersonal Connections

The people who participate in the school community matter to the construction of Catholic school identity, but beyond its intentional formation, the school also takes action to build community between the members who are already participating. One element of community building that appeared in several interviews was the interpersonal connections between students in the building, and between families, as a result of community events. As one teacher put it:

We have the celebrations, just to all of the plays that include the costumes and the opportunity to perform but also the feasts and I think, but that's just a way of highlighting, or showing forth the joy of our faith. (Teacher 1)

The principal described the school as creating this intentional community by choosing its calendar of events in a way that connected, in an outward-facing and public way, to the purposes of the school:

You still have to be aware of the population that you're serving, and you have a brand in one sense to uphold. So a lot of it comes down to choosing the events that you choose to populate, to host, to promote. And there's a lot that we say no to. There's a lot that we say, this is not intrinsic to why we exist. But as a family, if you want to promote that event, you're welcome to do so. But that should not be outward facing from the school. (Principal)

When I asked the principal what events the school says no to, he pointed to social opportunities that didn't explicitly connect to the character or mission of the school:

Over the years, families have asked us to hold a lock-in at the school. One time, a family asked us to change up the eighth grade class trip and make it a Disney cruise. Another time, families came to us and said we should be hosting a middle school dance on Valentine's Day. These are not terrible things nor evils, but just things that don't match or align with the rest of the curriculum choices, or match our mission and vision for choosing to do anything at all. (Principal)

Because students in all grades participate in the same or similar events, connections form between students of different ages. As one teacher put it:

And it connects the children. It's just a beautiful thing. When the older kids know the younger kids and then the younger kids look up so much to the older kids. It makes them become good models. (Teacher 2)

A parent echoed this teacher's sentiment, describing connections between students in different grades. While she expected older students to avoid interacting with younger students, she found that Sacred Heart's community ethos encourages such interactions:

It also is small enough that, or maybe it's just the community, that there's a lot of inter-communication between different grades. So you'll have people that are in the seventh and eighth grade that are seeing the first graders and I feel like they care about them. It's not like they're a bother, it's not like the younger kids are taking up their time, when I think a lot of kids in seventh and eighth grade, that's how they might feel. And we don't feel that way at

Sacred Heart. The kids do feel like they have a role in the community of Sacred Heart. (Parent 5)

The school builds these connections between students intentionally, and often uses not only social but academic means to accomplish this goal. For instance, the curriculum has a particular focus on history; students study history, including Church history, from ancient times in kindergarten to modern America in 5th grade, then return and cover the entire timeline again from 6th to 8th grades. One teacher described how this process can help build cross-age connections:

So the integration within the grades is key. The novels that relate to the historical time period that you're studying, the lives of the saints that you study for your historical period, we just finished reading about St. Kateri. Yeah, the colonization period in the new world. The art that you do, the art that you analyze, the music that you sing, the papers that you write. Within a grade. But then there's also the teamwork of the grades. The older grades and the younger grades and the activities that they do together as their year in the historical arc. It's beautiful. Sixth grade and first grade working together on the Greeks, and second grade and sixth grade on the Romans and it's beautiful. (Teacher 2)

These activities center around “feast” days, in which grades that share the same historical focus gather together to participate in a culmination of their study. For example, first and sixth grade might gather for a Greek feast involving Greek food, Olympic

competitions, and poetry recitations. Third and seventh grade gather for a Medieval feast where students dress as knights or ladies and practice jousting.

In addition to interpersonal connections between students, the school also strives to build interpersonal connections between families. One mechanism for getting families involved is to require them to volunteer in the school. One parent described that process as difficult, but with the benefit of building relationships between families:

There's also some tactics that they use, requiring volunteering by the parents. And also it's not easy for every group of parents to volunteer, but having that as a part of the agreement is a big deal because a lot of the parents are involved in the school. They also have school sports which are a big deal. [We] are involved in the school sports with our kids, and we've coached the teams, and that makes it so that you actually get to know the community and I feel like people do help each other when necessary. It's a little bit of a small school, it doesn't feel overwhelmingly large in terms of not knowing who everyone is. (Parent 5)

Parents may find the volunteering requirement difficult, and I discuss below the different effects these policies have on different kinds of families, but a parent also referenced the school's expectations as a net positive, drawing a distinction between the work the school should do and the work reserved for parents:

I haven't had any complaints. My expectations are that certain stuff as a parent I ought to do. So I also don't expect them to do stuff to parent my child.

I just expect them to support and complement what I am doing as a parent with my child. (Parent 2)

The idea here is that raising children is primarily a parent responsibility, with the school serving as a contracted learning expert regarding topics like math, history, and science that might not be intuitive for parents to teach at home. But value transmission, social interaction, and community participation are seen as parent responsibilities. The school claims this priority order itself, and the teachers use this language frequently, but for those in the school, it can be easy to default to a framework in which the school is “accomplishing” and the parents are “supporting”:

I think this is true across the world, that the parents are the primary teachers of the children. So, in any school, there's only so much the school can accomplish without the support of parents. And I think we can influence the children for Catholic identity. (Teacher 1)

Engaging families in this way serves two particular goals, both to reinforce community connections among all stakeholders, and to secure predictable participation from the families who pay the tuition that allows the school to continue to operate. This dual purpose illustrates that not every decision made by the school in support of strengthening identity is made at the expense of institutional health. The principal reinforced this point by illustrating identity using language that referenced brands and marketing as not in competition with identity, but as parallel to it:

I hate to use corporate examples, but you look at a company like Apple where everyone who's speaking on behalf of Apple deeply understands the

products, deeply believes in mission, and therefore is constantly personifying in a sense an invitation to it. And that's the same thing at Sacred Heart Academy. (Former Principal)

This comment reinforces a central premise to the construction of identity within an institution that requires external goods such as tuition to survive, namely that the school is seeking both simultaneously. By fostering interpersonal relationships and engaging families in the daily life of the school, identity is strengthened *and* cash flow is protected. The extent to which these priorities are necessarily in tension is a major subject of this study.

School's Purpose as Service to the Community

As I discussed in chapter 1, the identity of a community is oriented around a common purpose; the identity of a school is strengthened insofar as the school community shares the same goals. In my interviews, I found a broad consensus among teachers and administrators of the school that the purpose of Sacred Heart as a school was to serve the Catholic community:

I think it [the purpose of the school] is continuing to serve the Catholic community of [our area] at large. (Principal)

For context, based on the 355 students whose addresses were available in the 2023-24 Sacred Heart family directory, 151 (42.5%) were listed as from the local town proper, with another 98 (27.6%) listing an address within a 5-mile radius. 106 students

(30%) came to the school from outside that radius, which is roughly the same distance from Sacred Heart to each of the nearest other Catholic elementary schools in three directions, implying that these students have to pass another Catholic school on their way into Sacred Heart each day.

So the school primarily serves the local community, with nearly half of its students from the immediate neighborhood, although these are obviously a small fraction of the local community more broadly. This distinction can lead to tensions between the school community and the local community:

I think that might be different for some people, for sure, partly because this school was plopped right in the middle of a neighborhood. So, for some people, there's a very stark contrast of this is our neighborhood and you're a private Catholic school and you're right across the street from a public elementary school... But, I think there's also in the neighborhood a strong gentrification process that has been ongoing for 15 years or so. So, I think you get new people coming in with different expectations and different notions of why we're here, but I think we're still serving the people of [our town] at large. That continues to be the largest demographic. We continue to send graduates to the local schools. [Local Catholic high school] and [local Catholic high school] are still two of our largest schools that we send students off to, and that's historically been the case. So we're preparing kids to still excel and do really well in [our town] proper. (Principal)

The tensions referenced here can be conflicts over values, or disputes over shared resources. Often, these disputes occur between different value communities in the same geographic space. For example, the local town is a small city with significant racial, economic, and political diversity. Many local residents are vocal social liberals who have expressed distrust of the Catholic value system on community posting boards and listservs, with LGBT issues a particular source of debate. Because my focus is on the identity of Sacred Heart as a school and not as a contrast to secular value systems, I will not be exploring these debates in this project, except as context for the school's efforts to collaborate with the city and the local community that the school serves:

I think some people come to town, with maybe a different political lens and maybe we are no longer a fit based on current climate or culture, but I think a lot of those are presumptions. We've had some healthy dialogue with the city over the years and they definitely see our place and respect why we're here and they get it. Whether it's us pulling kids from the neighborhood to be in the school, or using the local parks, or having fundraisers that are open to the community, they're supportive and behind us. So there's a necessary place.

(Principal)

Sacred Heart does use the local city park for many of its events, including its "Race for Education" fundraiser, and any local students who choose to attend Sacred Heart rather than the nearby elementary school necessarily affect state funding formulas for the public school, setting up a tension between the two schools in competition for resources.

An additional point of tension is the relative diversity of the school. Although some families do see Sacred Heart as diverse, others see it as lacking diversity (I speak on these issues in greater detail below). In particular, the racial characteristics of the student body seem to differ from the racial characteristics of the families in the local neighborhood, which is an area the pastor believes is a potential area of improvement for the school:

I'm not sure if our demographics represent the neighborhood. That's sort of true for all Catholic schools. So we're diverse, but we probably should be a little bit more diverse considering the ethnic makeup of this part of [our] County. (Pastor)

Efforts to create a more diverse school community do reveal significant challenges for the school. One potential avenue for increasing diversity at the school is to reduce tuition barriers, perhaps through voucher programs. But these voucher programs seem to be losing ground, politically:

They [the State] did create a voucher program and so it does exist. It's been losing funding as of late and it doesn't sound like it's gonna stick around for the long haul. That's out of our hands. I would like to see that, because there are some scenarios and situations where a family comes to us and there's no way they can get their foot in the door without additional funding and outside help. So I'd like to be able to know that that exists for families. (Principal)

The uncertain nature of state funding from the voucher program illustrates the necessity that Sacred Heart must secure sufficient funding, mostly from tuition sources.

One way to increase incoming tuition, particularly with the school being oversubscribed, is to expand the number of students accepted into the school rather than (for example) raising tuition further. To that end, the school decided in 2019 to expand access by doubling the number of students it accepted, expanding from one class per grade level to two, described by many in the building as “double tracking.” That process certainly had its advocates:

Serve the community. Serve the families. We're here to serve. We're here to serve. We're not going to be this exclusive comfortable little school. We'll burst at the seams so that more children can benefit. (Teacher 2)

Advocates like Teacher 2 support the school's expansion because they perceive the school as providing value to students, and they conceive of the mission of the school as providing as much value to students as possible, so therefore more students means more fidelity to the mission. However, others expressed concerns for double tracking based on limited classroom space and the increased student population's drain on limited school resources:

There was, of course, the huge decision to go double track, and [former principal] had just finished getting back down to single track. I mean, within a few years before I came, because, I know, a lot of the teachers I first worked with had been great partners and then okay, then they were moving because we're going down to single track, and then with the great increase in applications. I had nothing to do with this decision and none of the teachers did. But [current principal] explained that and we were just turning too many

people away. That people were moving to [our town] to come to Sacred Heart and we couldn't let them come because we didn't have space in our classroom. and we had, I think I had 32 the year before we went double track. And that was fine. I was happy with 32 but I only had that many cubbies so I couldn't go any higher. (Teacher 1)

Others wanted to increase access not only to increase racial diversity, but also educational diversity, with particular attention to serving more students with special needs. One teacher specifically cited how going double track increased the school's ability to serve these students:

Yeah, so I think for the double track, it's just clearly the school's mission to serve as many people as possible. We have the privilege of doing that, with the enthusiasm for the school that has developed. So I think we have a Catholic identity that many people will sacrifice for. They'll travel, they'll move. They'll do what they need to do. So that is something we need to respect and honor and really try to broaden our embrace... it was just realizing that this is a better way to serve the kids. Because they'll have more tools and especially for the children with special needs... We do a good job, and public schools do too, but of integrating the kids with special needs. I realized this has to happen for them, that's what they need. (Teacher 1)

The Sacred Heart community, intentionally created and connected, is growing. Since May 2019, the school's K-8 student population has grown over 50%, from about 250 to a population of about 400 in May 2024. The total K-8 population of the school is expected to

reach nearly 500 students by the time each grade is double-tracked in September 2026. This growth allows the school to serve more families, and perhaps to better serve the local community at large. But the debate about school expansion illustrates a tension between commitments to the mission of the school and the efficient allocation of the school's limited resources. Moreover, growth has the potential to dilute or redirect the school's cultivation of Catholic identity.

Marketing and Attracting Students

One of the most tangible mechanisms for connecting the school to that larger community is the process by which the school markets itself and attracts potential new students. The school can only build an intentional community around the students and families that choose to be a part of that community, so the school's ability to attract new students is an essential part of its identity construction. The principal explained that the school doesn't engage in much intentional marketing because they find it unnecessary, relying instead on word of mouth and personal experiences to attract new families:

On the admissions side, we do a lot of tours. Our best marketing experience is letting people go into the classrooms and see what's happening. We don't actually spend a whole lot of money on getting our brand out into the community. At this point, we let them come in and see what it is. So if anything we just circulate dates when people are welcome to come in and see what's happening in the classrooms. We tend to have about a 90% application rate from people that come into the building. So if they come in

and see what we're hopefully aiming for every single day, 90% of those folks apply to the school. So that's been helpful. (Principal)

Relying on word of mouth advertising from the Sacred Heart community speaks to a consequence of identity cultivation, namely that the school community has so bought into the mission of the school that individual participants are eager to share their experience with others. Note that the cultivation of the community must happen first, and so such efficient marketing can be categorized not as a process of identity creation, but rather of identity maintenance.

The pastor of Sacred Heart parish added that the school and parish do participate in community outreach activities that also attract families to the parish and school communities:

I let the school do the job. The school is the biggest attraction. We [Sacred Heart Parish] do have a healthy homeschool network. And then we also sort of allow special things. They're doing the school choir, that's the big one. We had Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts. We have American Heritage Girls. We have a number of events that are pro-family events. And so that does attract people who are homeschooling, or at public school. That's how we welcome and evangelize families. (Pastor)

These activities and tours are a self-selecting form of outreach and likely attract only the kinds of families who were interested in Sacred Heart to begin with. Such self-selection might create a self-perpetuating insularity, in which only Catholic families are interested in joining because only Catholic families are sharing their experience.

To this point, when I asked specifically about aspects of the school that might concern families, two answers were common: first, that the classical curriculum was unique and perhaps unfamiliar to many families, and second that the school's Catholic identity could turn away non-Catholic families:

If I had a friend and they were concerned I imagine that one of their concerns would be the classical curriculum. It's not common. That will be their concern. I would also imagine that they would be concerned about the Catholic rigor, in terms of, are they trying to recruit my child into [becoming] a Catholic. So, those are what I would imagine they would be concerned about. (Parent 2)

These stories are not entirely hypothetical; I heard from one parent (Parent 5) who has had friends who left the school due to discomfort with the community, and I heard from a teacher (Teacher 1) who shared a story about a student's Baptist grandmother expressing exactly the concerns Parent 2 brought up above. But from the school's perspective, these aspects could be considered positives, since they ensure that the families who apply are at least open to a school exhibiting a strong Catholic identity:

That's the kind of families that we were drawing in as well. Of course, that's not to say that everybody in the school is Catholic. And that everybody is practicing Catholic. But we've had whole families convert at our school. Once we made our change and we have kids in the classroom who are evangelized just by how they live. (Teacher 2)

But other families might be concerned about being evangelized, that the school is “too” Catholic, or that its values conflict with their own:

I think that there's some people who don't want a school to be so Catholic. I think it might be too Catholic for some people. I think some people might be annoyed that that's a very palpable backdrop to everything. So I think that's not something that you are interested in, I think it would feel like it wasn't a match. I know there's some families who are not Catholic, and it's an issue for them. It's hard for them. They don't want their kids bringing home Mary saint cards and they don't want to be doing that, so it's something they're pushing against, which is understandable because they're not Catholic, but I think that in most Catholic schools, it might not be quite such a pushback required for someone who's not Catholic. (Parent 4)

One family, in which the father is not Catholic, shared their experience as generally positive, and as a part of a complete package the school offers:

In terms of the Catholic religious practices, I feel like it's sufficient what they have now. I didn't go to Catholic school, I'm not familiar with what it would have been like in an elementary practice. I never experienced anything besides Sacred Heart, and I haven't felt overwhelmed by it. But I have felt that it has been an important part, especially in the Montessori classes where they had time to go and reflect. Atrium [catechesis] was actually really nice, for the kids to have that time. (Parent 5)

This same family cited other reasons besides the Catholic identity as the reasons they were attracted to Sacred Heart:

We got into kindergarten and then our middle child was waitlisted and then she got in by that January for second semester to Montessori. We didn't have a lot of background knowledge of the classical curriculum. We just felt like the school was a nice place to be for our kids when she showed me around. It was a diverse school, it seemed like, and that was important to us. And we ended up moving very close to the school, so we walked to school every day.

(Parent 5)

These aspects that attract some families are not internal goods of Catholic education, *i.e.* they are aspects that could be and likely are valued by other families who are not Catholic, at schools that are not Catholic schools. The fact that some families are attracted to Sacred Heart by convenience, diversity, or some other aspect of the school does not undermine the connection that other families might have to the Catholicity of the school, but it does weaken the school's claims that Catholic identity derives from community subscription to the telos of the school. The principal could attempt to prioritize families who prefer to attend the school purely for Catholic identity reasons, and indeed the interview admissions process suggests that this priority does occur to some degree, but clearly not all families attend the school for exclusively these reasons.

Whatever their particular reasons for enrollment, the school does attract many families. The school is regularly oversubscribed, so it can downplay concerns over popularity, concerns that might inspire other institutions to pursue popular choices over

ones that create and maintain organizational identity. Sacred Heart, however, finds little tension between attracting families and pursuing its identity as a school. In fact, the school has attracted so many families that it regularly has to make difficult decisions to deny families it would rather accept:

Popularity I would say is just not really on the radar, we just don't aim for that. Convenience, if it can be convenient, great, but we're not in the business of that. We're trying to do something very unique and specific and trying to offer to families that really desire it, so we can't make it the most palatable thing. There's plenty of things we just have to say no to and plenty of times where it doesn't work for a family. And unfortunately, sometimes it's just like an entry point. We had a great family apply this past year. They had five children. We had space for three of their kids, but not for the two others. And so we had to tell them we're really sorry, we can wait list two of your kids and we have a spot for three others, so they ended up going with another school. So in that case, it wasn't very popular or convenient, but it was just the reality that we're living under. (Principal)

One parent shared a story that highlighted the admissions challenges that the school's popularity can cause for the families that want to participate:

I remember, we have a one and a half year old who got into the toddler program, so I think I got a stock email from [admissions director] that he sent all the new families with new students and it was like congratulations on

being part of the 27% of applicants who got in this year. So that means 73% did not get in. That is wild. (Parent 4)

Participating in the Sacred Heart community is an attractive option for many, if not all families. But the school attracts far more than local families. In fact, several teachers and families I talked to reported that they moved to this town because they wanted to be a part of the school community, with one teacher (Teacher 2) noting that several families heard of the school first in Rod Dreher's book *The Benedict Option*, in which he argued that Christians as a group and the Church as an institution will be more likely to survive in the modern world by carving out small communities of believers, rather than dispersing to participate in the broader culture. An Archdiocesan official commented on this trend:

Based on the enrollment, and the waiting list, I would say that they are very competitive. And people from not just [our town]; some even relocate to that area to attend the school. (Archdiocesan Official)

Indeed, some families move to the area before gaining admission to the school, which puts them in a precarious position. The principal described the process of admission that incentivizes families to move first as a tangle of competing priorities:

Lots of people tend to move first and then apply to the school. One downside is that some make an assumption that if you live in the neighborhood or will be registered at the parish then they automatically gain admission. We do prioritize Catholics and those registered in Sacred Heart Parish but we still have a lot of siblings that are gaining admission ahead of new families who live in the neighborhood and are in the parish. So there have been a few

smaller occasions where a family has moved to the neighborhood, registered with the parish, and now their oldest child is ready to gain admission... and they still land on the waitlist, because the class fills up with siblings first.
(Principal)

These competing priorities demonstrate a combination of practicality and intentionality. The priority for siblings is practical in the sense that families are far more likely to stay if they don't have to split across multiple schools, but it's also intentional in the sense that large families are disproportionately likely to be faithfully Catholic. The priority for Sacred Heart parishioners is practical in that the school exists in the parish to serve the parish first, and others if it has space, but it's also intentional in the creation of a functional community in the neighborhood.

Families are attracted, both near and far, to Sacred Heart for various reasons, and these reasons have implications for the Catholic identity of the school. Families who are attracted to the values and virtues of the school reinforce the school's identity by doing so, but those who are attracted to more prosaic aspects of the school, such as convenience, or more universal aspects, such as academic excellence, reduce the strength of the school's Catholic identity. Complicating this analysis, many families make their decisions not for one reason, but for several:

So at the beginning, we were looking for a convenient school for where we were going to buy a house. And I literally just went online and looked for good schools near me. And it came up fast on the list, so I decided to check it out. It was a bit of a process, but here we are. So, to be honest, I wasn't really

looking for private school, I was looking for a school that was close by, that was relatively close to where we were buying a house and a relatively good diversity ratio, good teacher to student ratios. Yeah, I think those are basically the things on top of my list. (Parent 2)

Families who join are necessarily individuals making their individual decisions based on individual value systems. The strength of any school's school identity is based on how successfully it can transform this collection of individuals into a community that shares values. Above, I discussed how Sacred Heart attempts to use recruiting, marketing, and community-building to build its identity as a collection of people. Next, I describe the classical curriculum, which is the single most important in-school mechanism Sacred Heart uses to create an identity that is both central and distinct.

The Classical Curriculum

Between administrators, teachers, and parents, the single most commonly cited source of the Catholic identity of Sacred Heart was its classical curriculum. A "classical" curriculum, as defined by the school, is one that both prioritizes liberal education over career preparation, and intentionally connects the ideas taught in the present to their historical roots in ancient and medieval thought. Not all classical curriculum schools are Catholic (although the vast majority are religious in some way) and certainly not all Catholic schools are classical (indeed, Sacred Heart is the only classical school in its Archdiocese). These distinctions complicate the connection between the classical curriculum and Catholic identity.

Below, I report on how the various stakeholders in the school talk about the classical curriculum, and how their ideas connect to Catholic school identity. In this section, I discuss the role of school mission in creating curriculum, how that mission motivates an interconnected curriculum, how the classical curriculum is distinct and unique from other forms of curriculum, the role of storytelling, how the classical curriculum caused an institutional “renaissance” at Sacred Heart, and what school stakeholders believe other schools can learn from Sacred Heart's experience with the classical curriculum.

Classical Curriculum as a Connected Whole

The classical curriculum provides Sacred Heart with a clear framework describing the content of each grade's academic focus: Ancient Egypt and Israel in kindergarten, Ancient Greece and Salvation History (*i.e.* a history of humanity as presented in the Bible, from the Fall of Adam to the Resurrection of Jesus) in first grade, Ancient Rome in second grade, the Medieval Era in third grade, the Renaissance and Reformation in fourth grade, and American history in fifth grade. The subjects then repeat for middle school, as students study Ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome in sixth grade, the Medieval and Renaissance eras in seventh grade, and American history again in eighth grade. Science (*i.e.* “nature studies”) and catechesis (*i.e.* “atrium”) are companion subjects that support the study of history. Students also study mathematics, English language arts, and Latin using regular daily practice, but the core of learning is rooted in each grade's historical era, supported by study of both primary documents and contemporary literature, typically historical fiction set in each timeframe.

The former principal referenced this historically-rooted curriculum as a source of identity, and her insight is that the connectedness of academic subjects mirrors the connectedness of the sacred and the secular. Specifically, she saw students learning about religion through learning the humanities:

Sacred Heart has an integrated core, which is an integration of history, literature and religion. Religion is also still taught separately and distinctly because it is a question of imparting the doctrine, but the first part speaks to, in a sense, pushing back on the modern tendency to see things of God, things of religion, things of faith as not proper to a discussion about history or civics or government or human experience. That's really nonsense. In terms of the breadth of human history, religious belief has shaped everything from our government to our music to our architecture. So some of that is simply pulling that thread back in. For example, when seventh grade studies the Hundred Years War, they read the Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc by Mark Twain to begin to see that period of time through the life of this amazing saint, connecting her witness to what they're learning, as they're reading the Gospel of John in terms of being an intentional faithful disciple. So it's beginning to unfold for them in that way. (Former Principal)

She went on to describe the current principal as a former 8th grade teacher, who executed these connections well and used history, politics, and literature to connect to not only catechesis, but an academic discussion of the philosophical groundings of the Catholic intellectual tradition:

Likewise, I know [Principal] is now the principal, but he was an outstanding eighth grade teacher beforehand and he used to do a unit on freedom. One of the goals is to help the student come to an understanding of what is freedom. When he would start the unit, he would ask the kids to define freedom, and they would all say freedom is doing whatever you want. And then the unit would proceed and he would give them types. Let's read some founding documents. Let's read this part of the Catechism. Let's read this encyclical. Let's read this poem. And discuss it and compare these things. And then by the time it's finished, they begin to see that actually you're most free when you conform closest to the truth. Being in the truth leads you to freedom. And this is what we learn from Jesus Himself, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free. It doesn't mean enough until they've waded through all of those types, and the goal is for the student to actually ingest this and digest this and then be able to express it. (Former Principal)

This comment describes a connection between what is *taught* and what the classical curriculum expects students to be able to *do*. The classical curriculum, then, is output-focused, assessing its success based on the aspects of students the school graduates, rather than based on the efforts of the teachers in the classroom, although these efforts are indeed the mechanism for creating the outputs. This focus is therefore a challenge for identity, insofar as the majority of identity construction I described above comes from the efforts of administrators and teachers, rather than consensus opinion across families and students.

The connection between inputs - what a student is taught - and outputs - what a student is able to do - is exactly the connection between curriculum and instruction, and is where Sacred Heart locates the particularly Catholic nature of the classical curriculum. To this end, the school elevates the role of “truth,” which in a classical understanding (as used both by the Church, following Thomas Aquinas, and by secular classical schools, following Aristotle) is objective and independent of subjective experience. This idea of objective truth then connects to action by presenting a “truth” of moral excellence, *i.e.* conforming one’s life to this true conception of the human person is what each person ought to do. The Sacred Heart vision statement makes this connection explicit:

We emphasize classical learning because we want our students to read well, speak well, and think well and ultimately because truth and beauty are good in themselves and desirable for their own sake. (Vision Statement)

This statement reflects a classical understanding of the humanities, and runs contrary to a more vocational educational approach that might prioritize skill development and employability, and might therefore allow more choices to both students and teachers who wish to pursue more individually relevant paths of learning. The implication is that these transcendent ideas of truth, goodness, and beauty are unavailable, or at least less available, in a less mission oriented, more choice oriented school.

By centering its mission, Sacred Heart allows subjects such as history, art, literature, science and theology to connect and reinforce each other. One teacher explained how her science lessons not only connected history to science, but also emphasized beauty and metaphysical truth:

Some years, I would walk with the kids over to [Local] Park, and we would do a nature lesson in the woods, or finding various elements in nature, but that's the joy of God's creation and sharing that enthusiastically. Seeing it all as one piece, from creation until now - I know creation is millions of years - and celebrating it. So even our nature study, especially in the early, I think all through, but I know in the early grades, we're not about just studying a certain thing, isolated from the rest. In first grade, we had a great opportunity to study plants and animals, but you would look at the seed and the stem and the flower and all that. But it was just appreciating the creation of the plant, and the integrity of the plant. So that's an idea that I think nature study can even support. There's an emphasis on historical contributions, even in nature study. So I would teach the kids about John James Audubon when we learned about birds, so we studied Audubon and his fascination with birds and drawing. And then, that's another thing, is there's a big emphasis on creating art, and even in the classroom. We did a lot of drawing for nature study.

(Teacher 1)

The above teacher emphasized the concept of integrity, here the integrity of a plant as multiple systems and organelles all directed to a single purpose to perpetuate the life and health of the plant. That same integrity applies to the curriculum of Sacred Heart, one in which different classes work together towards the same common purpose. As a parent noted:

I like the idea - how the different classes work together, nature studies and history and English would work together to keep on. I think fourth grade last year, it was the year of discovery and so everything kind of hinged on that. So it kind of makes their experience a little less compartmentalized, which is more authentically learning. (Parent 3)

But beyond its centrality, the classical curriculum is also a source of distinction for the school, not only in contrast to secular schools, but also in contrast to other Catholic schools: it “sets apart” the school. That being said, the pastor, principal, and many teachers do clearly believe that the classical curriculum is valuable in its uniqueness, indeed that it reclaims an older, perhaps particularly Catholic vision of education, focused on transcendent ideals rather than mere skills. The pastor said:

We are rediscovering the Catholic vision of education, which has been somewhat lost over the past century or so. The pursuit of the good, the true, the beautiful. Asking students to engage in deeper thinking, critical thought, debate. What has been lost in education as we switch to the John Dewey model of let's break everything down into little parts and teach set skills instead of exploring the transcendentals. (Pastor)

Leaving aside the accuracy of the pastor’s characterization, it is notable that interview subjects recognized a qualitative difference between the “transcendentals” of Sacred Heart’s classical curriculum and the implicit values of other schools’ course offerings. For example, one parent thought that most schools’ focus on STEM education is related to marketable job skills:

I keep thinking of access and the curriculum. Yeah, the curriculum is really unique. I think around here, the STEM focus is so strong. And I don't think that I've ever heard anyone at Sacred Heart even use the word STEM, unless they're talking about a plant. But there is a science background. Yeah, it's available to them, but they don't, it's not an agenda to get the kids got to be proficient and this feel like, again, not having students in any other schools, it's hard, but I do work with kids. I am a pediatrician and I talk to families and kids all the time. And there really is a lot of drive to play this proficiency and math, science, engineering, even young in elementary schools. (Parent 3)

This parent then drew a stark contrast between a STEM-focused education and one provided by Sacred Heart, in which the humanities are prioritized:

But again, the curriculum is very unique. I think the kids have a good understanding or deeper understanding of history than other schools provide and understanding that going through time there's a building block for each era and so it got my kids interested in ancient Egypt, interested in American history, Greek myths, mythology, and all those things are sort of the underpinning of our Western culture. Obviously, that's why they're teaching it, but again, those building blocks are really, really helpful for perceiving the world around you in a much richer way than they may be if you were in a standard curriculum. (Parent 3)

The latter approach not only prioritizes the content of the humanities, but the development of the child *as a human being*. Another parent described the effects of that humanistic approach:

There was one of the teachers who said it during our parent teacher conference... she said, "Does your child enjoy going to school?" And we said yes. "Does your child enjoy learning?" We said yes. She said that's enough. And it doesn't matter how well she does on her tests, but as long as she enjoys going to school and enjoys learning, she's gonna be great. And that statement I think rings true for most of Sacred Heart. It's more about developing the person first before developing skills, and the skills will come. And I've seen that with both of our daughters is that they think of things differently I think than I even do, than people that are outside of the curriculum do. It's pretty impressive to think about some of the things that they reference and that they've learned, and I think it is more about developing the person versus developing the skills. (Parent 5)

One parent spoke at length contrasting the Sacred Heart school experience with her memories of her own public school education experience. Her first perception of the difference regarded the "richness" of the curriculum, in which Sacred Heart asks students to consider classical texts:

My gosh, I love it. So here's why I think it's great... So two things, one is that the curriculum itself is just rich. It's like, they're not reading stupid things. They're not reading Nickelodeon materials, they're reading and looking at

and just absorbing things that are actually quality, which is amazing. (Parent 4)

For comparison, the Sacred Heart curriculum has students reading classical texts, such as the *Odyssey* in first grade, parts of the *Aeneid* in second grade, *The Sword in the Stone* in third grade, and so on. As one teacher remarked:

[The teachers] just get really excited, which I know I did too about the beauty and wonder of the historical period that they teach. So, I think that can really motivate the kids. They see if you're just really inspired by the story of Odysseus returning to Penelope. And I would really hope that I wouldn't cry. When they finally recognize each other, when she recognizes him. And they are drawn in. (Teacher 1)

A parent made similar observations, describing how a curriculum rooted in history provides students worldly context, so that:

The kids, they see themselves in the context of the world, instead of right now is all that matters, there's no past, there's no future. (Parent 4)

Again, it is not my purpose in this study to render value judgment on the classical curriculum of Sacred Heart as “better” or “worse” than other forms of curriculum, but to report stakeholders’ perceptions of the school’s identity. These interactions show that those perceptions are of a curriculum with different priorities than of schools that prioritize STEM, skill development, and compartmentalization. And they also demonstrate

that various stakeholders have different impressions of the connection between classical and Catholic.

One key, but potentially controversial objective of a humanities-centered curriculum is to provide students with a consistent, even universal access to ideas and patterns of thought. And indeed, the classical curriculum can be the source of an identity for Sacred Heart as a school because it is a unifying force across classrooms, students and teachers. One challenge that might arise from such a consistent curricular approach is pushback from teachers who wish to exhibit professional agency and choose their own curricular focus. To that end, one teacher described a tension she felt as she implemented the school's early-grades literacy program:

I came from public school where I didn't teach phonics, we didn't teach phonics in public schools. The kids were taught letter sounds in kindergarten and then the kids were reading and that was the way that we believed they would learn all the phonics they needed to learn was by reading, so I was soft on phonics And then Mrs. [Former Second Grade Teacher] came in and wanted to do some beginnings, which is a big emphasis on phonics. And I was just like, why? I'm sending you readers. Your second grade kids, you're getting great readers. Why do you want to teach them diphthongs and phonograms? And she just said they'll become better spellers, they'll become better at knowing syllables and whatever. So I had to really think about that and talked to a few people and I happened to be going to an ICLE conference that summer and talked to other first grade teachers who were doing heavy

duty phonics and one of them really convinced me. So I went back and said, okay let's do it and we dove into sound beginnings which I think was great, and now they have an even more comprehensive reading or phonics reading and spelling program. (Teacher 1)

What this teacher is describing is her ability to choose and rearrange within the boundaries of a particular literacy curriculum system. This interplay between teacher choice and school-level structure is shown in several ways across the school, and several teachers credited this structured autonomy with their success:

When we started with the Dimensions math program, I was really on the fence about it. We had a lot of different meetings about it. They gave us some different trainings, and the people came and we did it and could understand their theory behind what they wanted us to do. But the program that they had offered at that time for me, it didn't make sense. I had to completely change around the book. Some skills that they had the children not doing until the very end of the school year were things that they needed in the beginning of the school year to help them fully grasp it and understand it. Fortunately, within, I want to say it was the year or two when we started it, the company actually realized it and they revamped the program themselves. And so we were able to get in different ones, so it's been much better. But whenever we've had an issue, we bring our concerns to our admin. They're very good about listening to us, hearing us, and then helping to try to find a resolution, too. (Teacher 3)

For one fifth grade teacher, the freedom to design her own curriculum within the boundaries of the classical curriculum was an enormous responsibility, and is a consistent challenge. But she relished the ability to design her lessons based on her own expertise:

You have to be really willing to work hard. I remember when we first found it, I thought this is going to be so hard. I was getting older and had been teaching a while, but I don't know if I can do this. But then you get started, you start planning all your own lessons, you do all the primary sources and you study all of those and you put the textbook aside, you don't even use that. You pull out everything, you create all of your own lessons and I thought that's going to be so much work, right? But it's liberating and it's freeing for the teacher and so much so that after a couple of years, my husband said, you're not retiring anytime soon. (Teacher 2)

Sacred Heart provides significant support and structure to teachers as they make these choices. One parent described how this curricular predictability helped insulate the school from challenges related to teacher turnover:

I think too, there's the curriculum itself. I don't know if you have more questions about the curriculum itself, because I think that the teachers don't need to just invent anything, they're just executing on a curriculum that's already really good. So I think that the mix between the high quality of the teachers and also that they're implementing a curriculum that's already really great, it makes it a hard to fail situation. So I feel really confident, even if a teacher leaves and a new teacher comes, there's still planning the same

thing. So it's not personality specific, it's deeper than that, which I think is really helpful, to keep the quality high even if there's turnover among the faculty. (Parent 4)

In sum, Sacred Heart's classical curriculum provides its teachers a consistent academic approach that maintains students' focus on patterns of thought that are particular to the humanities and are rooted in history. This consistency, even given attention to teacher autonomy in pedagogy and in some elements of curricular focus, allows the school to construct an academic identity as a school. But for the classical curriculum to be a source of *Catholic* school identity, the final goal of this curricular integration must be the promotion of a particularly Catholic school mission.

Entire Curriculum Pointed to the Mission

In the above section, I contrasted choice-oriented education (built around electives, student interest, and skills-based lessons) with Sacred Heart's understanding of classical education (built around the humanities and notions of objective truth). The stated mission of Sacred Heart is to:

Incorporate our students into the wisdom of two thousand years of Catholic thought, history, culture, and arts so that they might understand themselves and their world in the light of the truth and acquire the character to live happy and integrated lives in the service of God and others. (Vision Statement)

The emphasis on “integrated lives” mirrors the Archdiocese’s expectations for all of its schools:

If you look at the Archdiocesan standards, Catholic identity is interwoven throughout the curriculum across all disciplines. So it's an expectation that Catholic identity is the first foot out the door when we're talking about instruction. (Archdiocesan Official)

According to stakeholders I interviewed, Sacred Heart in particular centers the role and perspective of the Church in its academic decisions. The former principal talked about using her expertise learned at Sacred Heart to help other Catholic schools more fully integrate their own curricula:

I traveled all over the country to schools, parishes, and dioceses who were inquiring about how to align their curriculum and their pedagogy more closely to the Church's vision of understanding, so that really required me to take all that I had learned at Sacred Heart Academy, which was significant, with a lot of thanks to our excellent curriculum committee that developed our plan and also formed me and the teachers, in an understanding of it. But then to continually expand upon that base of knowledge. To help schools to see that there's a singular philosophy that guides a Catholic understanding of education, which always sees it as an integral formation developing what's most human and in our students ordered ultimately to salvation in Christ. (Former Principal)

This “singular philosophy” is the philosophy of the Church, namely a teleological philosophy that informs moral decisions based on an *Imago Dei* anthropology. I will discuss the implications of this anthropology for Sacred Heart's Catholic school identity in more detail below; here the most important factor is the school’s attempt to define and develop a unifying mission around these anthropological ideas.

The teachers and parents I spoke with contended that Sacred Heart accomplishes this goal well, that they believed the entire curriculum is oriented towards the purpose and mission of the school. One teacher explained that this integration is precisely what makes the school a Catholic school:

About their Catholic identity, I think it would be how invested everyone is in it. That's a huge part of what makes us a Catholic school. Our faith is embedded into almost everything that we try to do and the lessons that we try to incorporate with it in the children. (Teacher 3)

And a parent reported that this integrated, religious approach is what attracted her family to Sacred Heart:

We were torn between a couple of options. My brother and his family already were at Sacred Heart, so we were interested. Eventually, we met Mrs. [Teacher 3], who really was fantastic. She told us that Sacred Heart doesn't have a separate religion class, but that religion is built into everything that we do here. I think we had already made the decision at that point, but Mrs. [Teacher 3] solidified that this was a place we wanted to be. (Parent 1)

Most Catholic schools do have religion as a separate course, taught by separate teachers with particular training in theology. But the classical curriculum integrates religion into its study of history, literature, and science with consistent references to Catholic anthropology in the humanities, and to creation in the sciences. Note that this curricular decision interacts with the above discussion about whether Sacred Heart teachers must be Catholic to be effective, since all teachers in the school are charged with instructing students through this Catholic lens. To this point, a parent explained how curricular integration is made more tangible by the prevalence of Catholic practices, and the hiring of faithfully Catholic faculty:

I think that the way that Sacred Heart is just so unashamedly Catholic, and teaching it and teaching truth and that it gives these kids a real exposure and a real grounding in their faith, and then if they do reject it later, they know what they're rejecting. There's no confusion. They pray the rosary during the day, they celebrate all the feast days. All the teachers, as far as I know, I think all the teachers are practicing Catholics and passionately Catholic. I think that somehow [the principal]'s able to just hire these really high quality teachers, who just give us this teaching without even trying because it's what they believe, it feels really authentic. (Parent 4)

A different parent emphasized how the connections between the mission and the curriculum come from decisions and ideas passed down from the administration, further anchoring their integration in the entire school rather than having them arise in particular classes with particular teachers:

One thing that they always say is that everything has to be rooted in our curriculum, it has to support the curriculum and what we're doing... Everything ties back, and so it's a pretty singular mission and they do a really good job, I think, of making sure that any group that's associated with the school is aware of at least obviously trying to follow the classical curriculum model. (Parent 5)

And another parent specifically connected the integration of Catholic ideas throughout the curriculum to the concept of Catholic identity:

I like how first of all, it's unashamedly Catholic, it permeates everything. Even the decorations and the colors for Carpe Noctem are the colors for Our Lady of Guadalupe, because it's around that time of year. And so every single event has to have some sort of connection to the curriculum and to the Catholic identity, otherwise, they don't want it to be part of the school. It's just they're really trying to stay true to the Catholic identity. (Parent 4)

So the concept of curricular integration is exceptionally important to the centrality of Catholic school identity, because it is *through* Catholic practices and curricula that the school presents to its students and families one consistent, mission-oriented message, despite or even assisted by a diversity of cultural representations. And if curricular integration is important to the presence of Catholic school identity, then “compartmentalization” is an entropic force, eroding the school’s commitment to identity by taking it away from this essential “one-ness.” As the former principal put it:

I think many, many Catholic schools desire strong Catholic identity, and they've taken great steps to achieve it. But the thing to overcome is compartmentalization, this idea that, okay, we're gonna have a strong Catholic identity and I'm gonna hire really great, all of my religion teachers are going to be vetted. That's great, that's a good first step, but Catholicity does not rest only with your religion teacher. It really has to be threaded through the whole program. (Former Principal)

This unity is a unity of purpose, pointing towards what the school and what Catholic education in general claims as its mission. But even though the school claims to prioritize the same mission that animates Catholic education in general, the classical curriculum is nevertheless a source of distinction for Sacred Heart in contrast to other Catholic schools; indeed, Sacred Heart participated in a more conventional Catholic school curricular structure until very recently. The story of the school's transition to the classical model is its most important narrative story.

Classical Curriculum as Renaissance

Perhaps the most consistent story Sacred Heart teachers and administrators told about the school itself was the school's "renaissance" after transitioning from a more conventional Catholic parochial curriculum to the classical curriculum. In this story, the school was a typical parish parochial school and was struggling, as many schools do, with enrollment. By 2009, the school was tens of thousands of dollars in debt, and the parish could no longer support it. As the principal remembered:

When the school went through the consultation process and almost closed in 2009, it was kind of backs against the wall; we either let this thing die or we save it and we build something new, in a renaissance in some ways and that is definitely taking place. (Principal)

The parish gave the school the option to close down, but the former principal convinced them to try converting to a classical school instead. This transition attracted significant attention, including a laudatory [large local newspaper] article in 2011 and references in books such as *The Benedict Option*. This attention seems to have attracted families, perhaps indicating a latent demand for classical education. Eventually, the school enjoyed higher enrollment, leading to the school as it is today, which is oversubscribed, debt free, and struggling instead with finding enough space to house the students who want to attend.

One teacher described this transition as a means to stay true to a particular set of values that mattered to Sacred Heart:

Hone in on specific values and qualities that we wanted to help empower our children. And I think that is able to transcend and be seen by others as well when they come into us we were able to keep our own identity instead of having to merge with other schools. And create our own pathway. (Teacher 3)

Another saw it as Providence, that the school was successful in taking drastic action when others weren't because of the gifts of the Holy Spirit present in the school at the time. She specifically referenced the renewed focus on the school's mission:

We were open, it was not a gift of ours, it was a gift of the Holy Spirit that was given to parents and given to the administration at the time. And together with the teachers at the time and the new teachers that came in we all were on board, and it was our mission. We were called on the mission to carry this through and see it through. (Teacher 4)

A third teacher identified the spirit of love embedded in the school, even before the transition, as the primary mechanism of its success, but acknowledged that the new curriculum accentuated this quality:

Even before the transition and even with some issues in the school and the declining enrollment, the sense in the school was it was filled with love, and I was so impressed. There was great love for the children and the families and among the staff. But as for the curriculum, it was wanting. It was just, it was a lack of something... And so, I think what happened was, we gave them something better to love. That's the whole gist of it. (Teacher 2)

One teacher explained that the community was strengthened when they transitioned to a classical model because only the families who bought into the new focus on religious curriculum remained, while those with more prosaic reasons for attending left:

So you know who left was the parents that came to the school because we had aftercare. Or the parents who came to the school because it was convenient. It became more of an intentional decision for parents to come here for academics and the authentic Catholic faith. And just the beauty of it. Not the convenience of it. (Teacher 2)

This story of rebirth and growth is now an essential component of the narrative identity of Sacred Heart as a school. It forms a key inflection point in their history, one that they can reference when asking themselves what it is that defines them as Sacred Heart. But a corollary to this self-reference is that (in the eyes of Sacred Heart community members) other Catholic schools, many of whom may be struggling as Sacred Heart was in 2009, could look to the Sacred Heart story to see how they could also grow and thrive. One teacher described how the Sacred Heart story is understood by those outside the school:

The big one, there is this failing school that completely turned up. They love telling the story at the Catholic classical conference because it's like, look what the classical curriculum can do now... Yeah, so it is a dramatic story. You know that we went from rags to riches in a way with this curriculum.
(Teacher 1)

So the story of Sacred Heart is a story of rebirth, and one that is attractive to other Catholic schools who may try to extrapolate lessons from the narrative identity of Sacred Heart. This story, then, expands to include Sacred Heart as scion of a young movement of Catholic schools transitioning to the classical curriculum model.

Other Schools Learning from Sacred Heart

Narrative self-understanding is central to the process of identity construction, and the narrative of renaissance by adoption of the classical curriculum is central to Sacred Heart's identity; other schools across the country and across the world have taken notice.

The school sends teachers each year to a conference of classically focused Catholic educators, and the Sacred Heart teachers are popular conference participants because of their story:

At our ICLE [Institute for Catholic Liberal Education] conference... that's where [former principal] ended up going before she went to the Catholic conference of bishops. So she was our first principal. So every year they have this conference and the Sacred Heart, well, it's embarrassing but they're rock stars. People were saying, oh, could we sit at our table with you? Like we were pretentious, which we're not, because, I mean, look at us. This is just who we are. We just want to be grounded at the heart of our parish school. But people who would hear of Sacred Heart, they would think, oh, Sacred Heart, but generally, we're just like these real authentic, joyful people who love the faith and love teaching the faith, and spreading this model. So when we go, if you're from Sacred Heart, you better be ready to answer questions. Yeah, it's amazing. (Teacher 2)

The former principal said she would challenge teachers to communicate about the new curriculum in a way that could attract others to the school's mission:

I encouraged that to happen because I knew that the teachers needed to own it and to be able to speak to it. In other words, I didn't want a situation where I'm the only one in the building who can really talk about it. I wanted everyone to be able to speak, and so it's a little bit of helping people out of a

comfort zone. So that was one of the ways that we embedded it. (Former Principal)

Once word about Sacred Heart's renaissance reached a national audience, teachers and administrators interested in the classical model began to come to Sacred Heart to learn more. Some come from across the country as a regular professional development opportunity:

We host Catholic school teachers from all over the country. So every November, the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education, which is in Ventura, California, they bring 35 teachers to Sacred Heart Academy every third Friday for a longer weekend. But on the third Friday in November, they are in our school all day. 35 teachers. (Teacher 2)

Others come from across the world, ad hoc and unannounced:

Last fall, I had a woman from Paris sitting in my classroom. All day. Because she wanted to take the model back to France. One time I was at Mass, oh this was hilarious, I was at Mass. It was before the pandemic, we still had the noon Mass and I went over to Mass with a couple of the kids and there was a visiting priest from Australia. And after Mass he said don't I know you? I think that EWTN [Eternal Word Television Network, a Catholic news channel] had come our very first year, EWTN had come and done this story on us, and I was really hiding under my desk. And when it was all said and done, and that it was over and I was just talking to the guy just from the heart what it is, what we do. And he said, I want you on camera. Like no, please please. But I

did. And so they put me on a story, it won story of the year for EWTN, for the EWTN nightly news. This was years ago, in 2010. The priest from Australia had been in America, in New Orleans for our conference, and while he was in America, he decided to come to [our town], he stayed at the rectory. He wanted to see the school because he'd heard about it on EWTN, and that's funny. (Teacher 2)

One consequence of all of this attention, and of the disciplined media messaging from Sacred Heart and similar schools, is that the classical model has gained significant popularity nationwide since 2009:

The Institute for Catholic Liberal Education said that the numbers of schools that are growing and forming, the number of dioceses and there's Tulsa and and in Michigan, entire dioceses are going classical, liberal arts. (Teacher 2)

However, Sacred Heart remains the only classical curriculum Catholic school in its Archdiocese. As described above, many schools from across the country are looking to Sacred Heart as a curricular model, but the model has not spread locally. One teacher described her perspective on the politics of the situation:

The Archdiocese approved our deal immediately in 2010. They were on board. But the person who made that decision has since moved to Boston College. We just had the Archdiocese here yesterday, bringing a group of people from Nebraska. But it was the first time that the Archdiocese had come to do that kind of tour. Usually they're brought by other organizations, the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education (ICLE). So there's always a kind of,

I don't know whether it's controversial or what, but I sort of frowned, it's like we're just that weird school in [our town] and do we really want another one? What's going to happen? My understanding is that some of the traditional Catholic schools, like the National Catholic Educational Association, from what I understand sometimes see classical schools as a threat to what traditional Archdiocesan Catholic schools are. (Teacher 2)

The pastor agreed that it was surprising the Archdiocese did not seek out Sacred Heart's story more often, and he described the Archdiocese's priority as for STEM, in contrast to a classical model, which he interprets as a bid for enrollment over Catholic identity:

I don't think they understand it. And this is why whenever there's this Catholic school that is struggling in this diocese, they rarely come to Sacred Heart to see how we became successful. Because 20 years ago, we were in their spot. The changes were made and now we have a waiting list. They always talk about STEM. We're going to become a science and technology school. They never say, we want to become more Catholic. And we're going to go for a classical curriculum. Part of that, in their defense, they're also with schools where there are very few Catholic students in them. (Pastor)

Whether or not this assessment of Archdiocesan decisions is accurate, the perception of a tension between Sacred Heart and “conventional” Catholic schools is a subject of distinction, and therefore a potential source of the school's identity.

Challenges in Maintaining Identity

As I described in chapter 2, building and maintaining the identity of any organization means consistently pursuing the internal goods of practice despite the need for morally neutral external goods, such as wealth and legitimacy. Schools, and particularly principals, can struggle to maintain a strong school identity, as they find creative ways to relieve the tension between these two pursuits.

Below, I describe several of these challenges, including challenges of maintaining discipline among students, tensions between the desires of the school's families and of the school itself, tensions particular to non-Catholic families in a Catholic school community, and concerns with the school's pursuit of diversity and inclusion.

Mediating Disciplinary Expectations

In the above section, I described how Catholic identity is both a source of a community and a consequence of a community that sets a consistent goal that orients the school towards a common purpose. However, the lived reality of school life can often be in tension with this stated goal. Students (and teachers) are human beings, with a wide variety of needs, and it can be difficult to cultivate a community that attends to all of them. As one teacher put it:

[The challenge is] being able to meet the needs of all of the students. There's such a wide range of their abilities and their needs that sometimes you feel

like you're not fully being able to provide for them exactly what they need.

(Teacher 3)

The principal spoke at length about the particular challenge of discipline, which raises serious questions about the interaction of the school as an institution and the practice of Catholic school identity. The challenge here stems from the tension between Christian notions of forgiveness and the infinite dignity of individual persons, however sinful (notions that tend to encourage second chances and restorative justice) against utilitarian notions of protecting the wellbeing of other students and the desirability of the school in an institutional sense (notions that might lead some schools to use removal from the school community as a disciplinary tool). The principal shared his perspective on discipline:

I think this decision [how to include Catholic identity in school policy] seems to come across most frequently in the area of discipline. In a sense that as a Catholic school and as a standard bearer of upholding the Church's teaching on the dignity of the human person at its most foundational, principled level.

(Principal)

In a school steeped in Catholic identity, such a perspective informs not only the educational space of the classroom, but also the principles of order and discipline. The principal interprets this perspective as prioritizing virtue, which considers each situation in its particular context, rather than relying on rigid rules, such as “zero-tolerance” policies:

It just makes it more clear and more pronounced when it comes to areas of discipline, you use faith in reason but the Church also says to use mercy and

justice. So, we draw on things like natural law, but we don't use a formula for discipline. That's treating the person like a robot, and it's three strikes and you're out, and therefore, x, y and z. It's more nuanced because there's context, there's circumstance. Is this the first time this person has ever run into a mistake, for instance, or are they a repeat offender, and we exhausted every single thing in our toolbox, and now it comes to a moment? Or is the parents behavior to a point that the trust has been broken with the school? Maybe we need to illuminate that and help the parents see: if you're not at a point of trusting us, how are we going to safeguard the virtues in the habits and the wellbeing of your child. If it's really broken we need to take a hard look at ourselves and see what's the best remedy? (Principal)

In one example, he described how he had to settle a dispute between two families using these principles:

So, I don't know if I have a particular instance, I guess I can think of one scenario. This was several years ago, it was first graders. They were two students in gym class. They were playing a game of tag of sorts with multiple balls at play. One child had a ball in their hands, the other one didn't. One of them grabbed the ball out of the other child's hand. So the first child smacked the other child in the face. You don't love that, you don't celebrate it, but it is something that does happen amongst children that are five and six years old, that's a physical reaction to something not going their way. So the child was okay, there was no blood, there was no deliberate harm to the child other

than it happened. They were checked out by the nurse, she stated the child's going to be okay, they were treated and I called the parent up of the child that had been struck and explained the scenario to the parent. And the parents said, on the phone, I hope you're going to expel that child from the school for hitting my child, and I said, absolutely not. We're not going to expel them. That would deny their humanity in some sense. That would tell the child that there is no room for any margin of error or any false reaction to any scenario. I said if anything a first grader needs to learn and be taught. So I said, are there disciplinary measures in place? Yes. And have I spoken with those parents as well? Yes. I'm not gonna disclose all those things, but kicking the child out of the school does not solve it, it does not treat the formation of the child in this instance. If we're talking about eighth grade students and it's a full, fisted swing at another student over something like that, that's a different set of criteria, and we would react differently, but we have no gumption of expelling students who are in first grade for such a reaction. So that's the one that comes to mind at least. (Principal)

This is not to say that a particularly Catholic approach to student discipline wouldn't set firm boundaries and expectations, but rather that these expectations would have to be rooted in something external both to the particular situation and to exogenous or bureaucratic rules. In a Christian context, this means rooting rules in principles like the Ten Commandments, but also in Christ's instructions to forgiveness:

Certainly when a kid messes up and has a behavioral concern, we try and tie in virtue and try and tie in the Ten Commandments. I've even taken, I had some kids and they in a fist fight one time and we talked through the scenario for a long time and I said, guys you want to go over to the church and make a visit about this, and they were both like I think that's needed. And those were sixth grade boys and I was like, that's great, that's hopefully what we're aiming for, that I'm not dragging you over there but you want to go and you want to make amends with God and say okay, we screwed up. We messed up, but we're trying to fix this and correct it, and we need to go follow some due diligence and make good on our reparations here. (Principal)

In these anecdotes, the principal relays how he relies on the Catholic identity of the school to inform his mediation of disputes between two students. Similar tensions arise in disputes between the school and the families that comprise the school community, and are met with similar approaches.

Tensions Between Families and the School

One of the key principles that Sacred Heart teachers and especially administration believe, and that I reported above, was that the school exists as a supplement to parents, who were the primary educators of their children. One parent confirmed that she believed this was the school's perspective on school-parent relationships:

They've been saying that for years when the old principal was there when our older son was just starting and then for the next couple years after that. And I remember her saying that, because at the time it was very reassuring because so many people we know in our community have done so many different things with their kids, and it's like you get swept up in this feeling of am I going to make the right choice for where I send my kids to school? And it was just reassuring to think that, no matter what we choose, we are really the primary model teacher. The school themselves said that it was really reassuring. (Parent 3)

However, there remained significant challenges in this particular relationship. The former principal reported that some parents were hesitant to remain with the school when it transitioned to the classical model in 2010, mostly due to the uncertainty of being a part of a radical change:

I'll start with the families. There weren't many who left. There were, when I say, I think it was fewer than 10 that left because of this. I certainly invited each of them, once they had mentioned that they weren't returning, I invited them to have a conversation, some of them did and some of them just said look, this feels like that's an experiment. I don't want you to really experiment on my kid. Now, I'll just be happy to go down the street to the school that's doing it the way things have been done. And part of respecting the parent as the primary educator is respecting when they don't necessarily agree, and saying okay, understood. (Former Principal)

The above quote indicates an interesting tension between the classical curriculum and a sense of *school* identity, in that the parents who resisted the change were seeking the maintenance of what had endured as the school's identity up to that point, but those who promoted the change were advocating for the classical model as a way to strengthen (their interpretation of) the school's identity. If the former parents perceived that they could transfer to other Catholic schools in the area in order to continue to participate in the previous iteration of school identity, then this belief provides further evidence of the classical model as a source of distinction between Sacred Heart and other Catholic schools; that for these parents, at least, classical and Catholic were not synonymous.

The former principal also discussed how she sought to include parents in social events to rebuild the community after the transition, but that she found it difficult to convince many parents to participate:

Certainly there were parents who even after the advent of this new vision weren't all that interested in being participants, there's just people that aren't necessarily joiners, and what I came to understand was that you serve people, you sort of do meet them where they are. And perhaps, the only thing we could really do was help to form and to nurture their children while we have them during the day. And so we became accustomed to saying we'd like to provide this, maybe it's a coffee evening or a wine and cheese evening with some type of talk for parents, we used to call it the parents symposium, in the beginning knowing full well that we might get 12 people, and that's okay. There's a lot of reasons why it's hard for families to necessarily be able to

actually participate. But what I did find was that even among those we didn't see a whole lot, there was an awful lot of support for what we were trying to do. (Former Principal)

But despite the assertion that the parent is the primary educator, several teachers and school officials described tensions between the desires of the parents and the ability of the school to meet these expectations:

The hardest role is meeting unreasonable demands of the parents. I'm going to only slightly exaggerate but Covid brought out the worst. And so you had one, it was a small group. Really, they wanted daily testing. They wanted if a child's mask slipped beneath their nose, that child should be sent home for two days. There was one extreme. And then we had the other extreme where they just wanted the kids to run around coughing on each other. Both sides are just so unreasonable. And that happens in lesser degrees every year. Yes, but you still have that basic tension between every school: public, private, Catholic, sectarian. You have parents who you cannot meet their needs. Or their expectations are just not reasonable. (Pastor)

These teachers and administrators emphasized that while conflict in a school community is inevitable, Sacred Heart has a track record of finding solutions that work for both the school and the families:

Sometimes it's how we respond with parents when parents call and part of it is the teachers look at it from a different point of view and the parents look at it from a different point of view. And we as administrators need to figure out

how do we do it to where it'll please both parties, which is hard to do. So sometimes we do the call either to save the teacher, or to make sure that the parents understand that their child or whatever decision that we're making with a child is to benefit the child per se. So the teachers might not agree with what we call at the time or the parents may not agree. As long as the child is safe and secure and we're able to help the child, then sometimes we don't agree. Most of the time, we do agree, but there are some calls that are made based on the needs of the child. (Teacher 4)

Some parents reported occasional disputes that they believe were not handled well by the school, in some cases leading to persistent tensions between teachers and the family:

Our experience was more social. Like a teacher might accuse our son of saying something that he's saying he didn't say, but this teacher also has a son who doesn't get along with my son. So this teacher is not going to take my son's word for it or my word for it either. And it just makes us feel awkward the rest of the year. (Parent 3)

At a foundational level, the disputes seem to arise from a difference in priorities, with teachers and administrators of the school valuing one perspective, and families the other. As an example of this clash of priorities, the pastor of Sacred Heart parish described the process of admitting students to limited enrollment slots:

So for the past few years now, any new families are interviewed by [Principal]. And everybody who is applying, they have a 15 minute Zoom interview to find out, why do you want to be here? And if you mention the

curriculum, you've read the educational plan, and you can talk about it, that gets you into the school. But if you say you have a great CYO program and I want my son to play basketball at [local Catholic high school], you're probably not going to make the list. (Pastor)

Note the direct contrast to the perspective of one of the parents, who referenced the exact same decision from a different perspective:

I agree with [my wife] that I wish it was more diverse at our school. I know that there's people that play sports with our school that we coach that do not go to our school, but they join for the sports teams, CYO, and it would be great if they could go to the school because they're friends with us and they might live farther away, but some of them don't, some of them live closer and it would be great if they could go to the school because they participate in the sports teams as well. So I don't know the reasons behind why they're not there, but it would be nice if that matched up with the community of students as well. (Parent 5)

This example highlights an interesting tension between two different priorities that underlie two different conceptions of school identity. The pastor is indicating that the school prioritizes an academic approach that highlights attention to the classical curriculum, and that understands parent familiarity with that attention as a proxy for the family's value match with the school. In contrast, Parent 5 indicates that some families prioritize sports excellence (I will note here that Sacred Heart regularly has a nationally ranked basketball program, with 3 alumni who are currently in the NBA, and another who

is in the NFL) or participation in sports with friends, both opportunities to build community, a valuable component of school identity.

As I claim above, the school understands the curriculum as a major source of its school identity, and as I claim below, that curriculum is uniquely Catholic in its approach, so therefore the school's perspective here might more closely align with Catholic school identity. But given that the priority for community is also central to the identity of a school, both the pastor and Parent 5 have valid perspectives on this debate over the limited resource of admission to the school.

Non-Catholic and Small Families Feeling Excluded

One aspect of the Sacred Heart community that several parents reported was distinct about the school was the relative prominence of large families. One parent in particular discussed how "visible" these large families were, connecting them explicitly to the school's Catholic identity:

They [concerned potential families] tend to talk about the large families at Sacred Heart. They're worried that if their family isn't 5, 6, or 10 kids, that they won't fit in. But we have diverse types of families here. I tell them that everyone belongs at Sacred Heart. Even if they're Catholic or not. But the large families are very visible, and that can make others hesitant. (Parent 1)

According to these parents, large families participate the most in the school community, and are treated more positively by the school itself. Note that the school does

have a preferential admissions policy for large families: siblings of current students are prioritized for admissions, and the school discounts tuition for multiple children, allowing fourth children and beyond to attend for free. This leads to some concerns of bias in favor of these families, including large families of teachers and staff of the school. One parent spoke to me at length about her experience navigating this tension:

And this is something that I will say, and this is something that they should work on. Culturally speaking, big families and stuff. This is like, I'm not trying to tattle or tell on anyone. My experience is, as factual, is that sometimes I felt that my one child in particular who happened to have classmates who were children of staff and administration, that there was some bias. And that if you're not in with these particular kids that you might not get that same benefit of the doubt that in other circumstances, that I would really value some of these teachers. So, that's something that in some cases was really painfully obvious. In other cases, you could just ignore it and I think the school already kind of knows that that exists. I don't really know what they would ever do. I don't know, that's a hard one. I know they've lost families because I know for a fact because of the dynamics in my one kids class.
(Parent 3)

Parents connect the idea of large families with the idea of conservative Catholicism, perhaps reasonably; the term “conservative” here reflects not a political lens, but a preference for theological orthodoxy, including on issues such as birth control. This

impression may dissuade some families from participating in the Sacred Heart community, as they may be concerned about a clash of values between the school and the family:

Absolutely, it's the fact that it's Catholic, and it's pretty conservative Catholic. Because I have friends outside of the school who are either not Catholic, not Christian or just not religious and I don't even know why they would think I would be recommending the school to them. I don't know, that is the number one thing for me? I think there's a perception that what they teach at school may undermine whatever teaching they have in house. (Parent 3)

One parent expressed her perspective that Catholic education was primarily focused on academic excellence; in her view, Catholic schools weren't meaningfully different in priorities than public schools, but rather were simply more effective at accomplishing the same goals. This perspective allowed her to claim that non-religious families would easily feel included at Sacred Heart:

When I was growing up, if people went to Catholic school was just sort of like an acceptable alternative to public school. Just like okay, the other kind of school and it wasn't like... I know people who are Muslim who went to Catholic school and thought that I had a great education at Catholic school and I learned this, I don't know that Sacred Heart appeals to the non-Catholic masses. When I say masses, I mean mass population. Is there room for secular families? I think there is, because they're there and they're definitely part of the community, but if I was recommending it to a friend, I'd have to

really qualify it with explaining that you don't have to be Catholic. You don't have to be religious, I'd have to really explain that part. (Parent 3)

This perspective seems to indicate that Parent 3 understands the Catholic identity of the school less as a product of the students' belief systems, and more a product of the focus on religion by the school. Note that given a definition of organizational identity as shared perspectives across stakeholders, this perspective would reflect a weakened Catholic school identity. This tension, between a desire to be inclusive and a desire for agreement on core principles, relates to the "threshold" of non-Catholic students I referenced in the intentionally constructed community section above.

This same parent praised a local Catholic high school for its different approach, in which they more consistently and more explicitly sought to include non-Catholic families within its community:

One thing I really appreciate about [local Catholic high school], when we did the [admissions event], but one thing [this school's Pastor] would always say to really talk about the non-Catholics of the school feeling at home there. And even though it's maybe a minority it is really verbalized. I know there's not many, but there's some Jewish kids, there's kids who aren't religious and I don't think at Sacred Heart there's really any of that. I don't think I've ever heard anything like that. It just is what it is. (Parent 3)

The school expresses an official openness to non-Catholic families, but the impression among parents is that the Catholic identity specifically attracts Catholic families, including large families. But despite their desire for a more religiously diverse community,

several reported that they didn't believe the school was making a bad choice, recognizing it instead as a choice within the aegis of Catholic identity:

I mean, I don't think they're obligated to respond to that concern because it's a Catholic school. So I mean that there's no shame in their approach at all. They certainly have, there's parishioners, there's people in the community that are more than happy to send their children there. So I don't think that they have anything to apologize for on their own and if anything that I would say they need to change honestly because it seems to be a pretty successful formula. Like if enrollment was a problem for them right now, then they might think about making sure that the school felt open to secular families. But given that they have the opposite problem and all of those families are so darn big that they really probably best to not really even go there. And there seem to be new families on a regular basis who come from all over, either because of work or because of the school it seems or the community. So that's really unique, I would say. (Parent 3)

But even if the school promulgates policies that advantage large Catholic families, parents report a comfort with the school's Catholic identity. One anecdote from the same parent illustrates an attitude not of exclusion, but of grace and generosity:

I was on a field trip last year with [daughter], and I take the kids to Mass. And I don't go out for communion because I'm not Catholic and I usually sit behind, whatever it's fine. And [her teacher] said to me, you can come up and just cross your arms and get blessed. You can do that anytime you want and

stay with your family. I just love that. So nice. No one had ever told me I could do that before as an adult. I thought you had to only be a kid to do that, and so I thought that was really nice, that idea of welcoming everyone. (Parent 3)

These comments illustrate real contention about the role of religiosity in the school's chosen community, and whether the school would be best served pursuing more explicitly Catholic families, or more religious diversity. Parent 3 articulates a dynamic tension between the school's official stance (including welcoming all students, regardless of family religious identity), school policies (such as providing discounts to large families, who are disproportionately Catholic), and more subtle pressures (such as a potential unspoken preference for Catholic families). These tensions point back to the complicated process of school identity construction, and to its often contradictory demands.

Concerns with Diversity and Inclusion

In a Catholic context, diversity can mean many things. The Church is a worldwide institution, with an Argentinian pope and its most rapid growth happening in Africa, but the roots of the Church are firmly in Europe, and many today perceive the Church as a white institution, fairly or unfairly. Some churches and missions exist to serve the world's and the country's poorest people, but other churches and particularly some Catholic schools have reputations for serving primarily white, upper middle class parishioners. Several of the Sacred Heart stakeholders I spoke to mentioned diversity, and their primary metric was racial diversity, specifically the proportion of white students relative to the demographics of

the local neighborhood. But other forms of diversity, particularly economic diversity, matter to the school as well.

Sacred Heart does have a student population with some racial diversity, even if the diversity of the student body does not match the diversity of the local community. One parent reported a change away from racial diversity over the past few years:

I do think that we've seen, when we first joined Sacred Heart, we thought it was very diverse, and we've seen that change a bit, to become less diverse. So for me I would love it if we could kind of get back to where we were in the past. I don't know why that's changed, and I would love it if we could, so that's part of it, just the makeup of the classrooms themselves. (Parent 5)

Relatedly, some families expressed concerns regarding not the student population, but the teachers. The Sacred Heart faculty is almost entirely white, and these families see teacher diversity as a potential positive for making students of color feel more included:

I think my current concern would probably be to increase diversity ratios amongst the teachers. It concerns me that there is not a single teacher of color, and I don't want my children, who are African, to get confused. I mean, I talk to them about it, and they have other places where they have seen diversity, in our church for example, but it would be nice if they could be able to interact with an Asian math teacher or an African art teacher, or, just differences in that regard from a school administration point of view. (Parent 2)

One family in particular spoke to me at length about their experience regarding diversity at the school, and their suggestions for a more inclusive path forward:

Yes. Let's just be clear. There is a perception issue. We've had several families, friends of color who have left the school. And not on good terms. And I think because they love the school or the people they haven't... I'm always concerned, are they gonna go public and blast the school? But I think because they love the community, they haven't, but there's been a lot of pain that I've witnessed firsthand. People confide in us a lot, which I really appreciate, and are very open with us. We've had friends of color who haven't felt welcome at the school and who've left. It's pretty upsetting, and so it is something every year where we're like, does this make sense for us? Are we in the right place? We have that conversation every year. It's not like a guarantee that we're going to continue at the school. It has to be making progress, which I think it is, but it's not always quick enough... Really, we've had that situation, we've had that scenario recently, and it's always because the perception of, is my child going to be comfortable there? And I hate that. A friend of color will ask me that it really upsets me that that's even a question, but that is the main concern that I hear. (Parent 5)

The latter parent cited the lack of diversity among teachers as a significant concern that could be a source of discomfort for some students of color. In addition, she connected the lack of diversity to perceptions of student discipline:

That and what does the staff look like? Is the staff diverse? And they're not. Recently, there's more male teachers, but they were all female white teachers for a long time. And that was a problem to overcome that perception. And then also about resources for kids that might need more attention and resources, I've heard that before too. Because it's a private school, because we don't have the level of staff to be able to accommodate kids with... as soon as someone acts up, it's very strange at Sacred Heart. It's almost like you're put on a bad list of some sort. So I've heard that before too. (Parent 5)

Note the difference between this family's perceptions of the discipline process at Sacred Heart and the principal's report above. For the parent, diversity, particularly adult diversity, plays a serious role in promoting sense of belonging, which in turn ensures a supportive and welcoming environment:

For me, it's about having an inclusive teacher, a teacher who will make my child feel comfortable and welcome. Our middle child [who is a student of color] has definitely had some difficulties with feeling like she doesn't belong in the school. So we've literally thought about pulling her out and putting her in a more diverse public school or a different environment for her. For me, the most important thing is... I mean, I would love a teacher of color first of all, because I think she would love to have a role model in that way. And I'm sure you know this, but having teachers of color benefits all students, not just kids of color, the white students as well. So that would be huge, I would be really excited for that. But if we don't have that, then at least having a teacher who I

know is gonna be very inclusive and just making sure all the kids feel welcome and supported. (Parent 5)

This same parent also identified the curriculum as a source of concern, since a classical curriculum centered on the Western canon can be interpreted as prioritizing a Eurocentric historical frame:

I would say that I think it's important that they clearly define, I think it's a challenge, what the classical curriculum means. Because I think to different people it can mean different things. If you don't have any awareness, knowledge about what it actually is, a lot of times it could just sound like focus on European, Eurocentric basically. That's important to clarify because I think our school, sometimes there's a perception about the school. And sometimes it's fair, but sometimes it's not, because they're not clear about what it actually means... So this is definitely a concern. I have a lot of friends who will ask us, is this the right place for our kids? Is this totally Eurocentric, whitewashed almost or are they gonna learn about different cultures? And I think when we first joined I wasn't actually really sure. (Parent 5)

While this parent is primarily reporting on perceptions for outside families, she reports that her experience with the curriculum had both positive and negative moments. As a positive, she reported that though the curriculum centers a Western experience, it does not “whitewash” that story, instead presenting it with honesty, flaws and all:

I would say a turning point for me was fifth grade because [my daughter] had [Teacher 2]. And the American year is really hard, I think, to balance and

teach in a way where the kids walk away with a really full comprehensive understanding. That was like a test for me. I was like, I really want to see how she's going to teach that. It's so difficult, but I feel like she did such an amazing job. I was really impressed. Just my daughter coming home and how she talked about it. I was like, okay, I feel like it's like our perspective, what we would want to have taught. And in terms of the dignity of the human person, that's really important. And I thought she did it really well. So that helped me understand, but that took a long time, that's fifth grade. (Parent 5)

But in contrast, she also experienced lessons that treated non-Western stories from an entirely outside perspective, which simplified and misunderstood important cultural ideas to the point of perpetuating stereotypes:

So sometimes we weren't sure, there were some issues we had with the curriculum. There was one year where the kids had to African dance? Yeah, they were gonna dress up with masks on and they were going to create African masks, and I really pushed and I asked what does that mean, what countries are they studying, how does that tie to that? I thought that was really scary because I was in one way, when we asked questions, it was kind of like oh, we've just been doing this for years. But they did change the assignment because I think it was obvious that it could be really offensive. My family's Nigerian and when you say African, there's so many countries in Africa. So just to make sure we don't delve into stereotypes. They were gonna

have the kids playing with spears, the boys. And so that was a little troubling to me. (Parent 5)

The principal responded to these criticisms of Eurocentrism by recognizing and accepting that these are the places and cultures from which the Church's story arose. According to this view, if the school wishes to be authentically Catholic, then it must derive its value system, and its story, primarily from these cultures:

Yeah, it's a common critique that does come up. I would say when we speak of Western civilization, we're talking about a body of ideals and values deriving from three main cultures that seem to lay a foundation. So you're talking about Athens, Rome and Jerusalem in particular, and we admire these cultures but we also judge them based on their ideals. So they serve as a foundation of sorts but they are certainly not immaculate. They are certainly not free from judgment. The way that our culture coexists today, in the sense of you have to know history, you have to know the groups that shaped and molded much of history, but we also don't exclude any and all other cultures from the narrative. Certainly those three cultures that I mentioned have a prominent role in our study because they do shape and we do draw upon them in much of the climate that we live in today. But it's not solely exclusive to them. (Principal)

In sum, this parent reported that the school has been responsive and receptive when she brings blind spots and problematic lessons to their attention, but that it has relied on parents like her to address these issues, rather than being proactive in preventing them:

So there's been stuff like that over the years where we've to really keep an eye on what's happening, and then we've pushed back. And typically it's like, we've been doing that for years, we'll change it. We never get pushback, but it's almost like I wish that they'd be more proactive about the curriculum and go through and just be very careful about what they're teaching, versus we've just been doing this for years. So there's stuff like that. (Parent 5)

This family was very clear to me that they enjoyed Sacred Heart and was generally pleased with their experience at the school, but that diversity issues were a particular concern that they believed could be addressed with more intentional effort on the part of the school:

I think they need to have a diversity committee. That seems really obviously glaring to me. [High School] has a DEI coordinator who I've met. She's incredible. They have a whole committee and that has been huge for the alum community. We have alum events and stuff like that. I know for the students, they feel really supported as well. But even a consultation from a DEI expert or something. There are people who can do that who, again they could talk to people from [High School], I could connect them. There's people who have a Catholic school background or expertise that can also speak to DEI issues. I feel like they need to have a consultant or something, someone to review what are the policies, what can we do better? I actually think ideally it would be a full-time person at the school who focuses on DEI in curriculum, as well as training of staff, because right now all the teachers and the administration,

they want to know this stuff, but they just don't know. Exactly. Any time it's brought up to them, everyone's very understanding. But there are things that have been said, there are things that have been done that are just, lack of knowledge. Blind spots, ignorance, I guess. And that's hard to do. If there was someone at the school that they could go to, or at least they could consult with if they are concerned about something, training or something like that, it would be very useful. (Parent 5)

The above comment indicates that Parent 5 believes that the Catholic perspective is distinct from a perspective focused on DEI, but that there exists enough overlap that the school would benefit from a professional with expertise in each. This overlap between Catholic identity and a focus on equity and inclusion might have its roots in the same anthropology that rooted the principal's perspective on discipline, an anthropology that recognizes the dignity of the individual human person while rejecting the utilitarianism that underlies many DEI priorities.

For example, DEI initiatives might argue that the good of a community, such as the local community, is best served by having educational institutions reflect the population of the community they serve. This approach is perfectly reasonable in a utilitarian framework that prioritizes maximizing the greatest good for the greatest number of people, but runs contrary to an *Imago Dei* framework that would likely ignore the consequences of the school's admissions on the surrounding community in favor of considering each application and each student individually.

In addition to advocating for a DEI presence in the school, this parent also referenced two particular experiences in which she believes a more diverse school would have been more successful:

There's little things, like in the [parent newsletter], at the very bottom, they'll say if you want to get this translated, you reach out to Señora [Teacher]. I'm a fluent Spanish teacher, I used to be a Spanish teacher, and I know that I went to one of the meetings with the Latino parents last year and I found out that a lot of them felt like they weren't getting the communication. There were a couple parents who were so upset because they got bills at the end of the year for not volunteering, but they didn't even know there were opportunities. So it was like stuff like that can put a really bad taste in someone's mouth. And then they're not feeling connected to the community. So I feel like there's a lot of stuff we could do, but just having someone to review what we're doing would be really helpful, to give recommendations to start, but eventually I would love to see us have an actual committee similar to what we have for... we have a special needs, I think or students with disability. There's a new committee that was created last year to talk about issues with students with disabilities and stuff like that. So maybe something like that where we could actually address it as a community... When I joined the Parent Volunteer Corps, at that point I was the only black person on there, and it really troubled me, it stressed me actually, because I was like what is going on? So there's been stuff like that, but whenever I've brought it up, I feel like people are very open to change. Mr. [Principal] has always been very

responsive, oh totally, let's fix that, it's corrected. But again, we don't want to feel like we're always pushing, that's not our job. It should be like a top-down approach where it's like they have a way that they're looking at these things holistically. So be more proactive, basically. (Parent 5)

These concerns reflect a belief system that prioritizes diversity, equity, and inclusion, both for principled and practical reasons. No teacher or administrator I spoke to in any way suggested that these priorities were in tension with the priorities of Catholic identity, and Parent 5 positively noted above that the principal of the school had consistently been willing to listen and make adjustments when she had made suggestions in the past. But few other interviews - and no teachers or administrators - identified diversity as a major concern. Instead, these interview subjects focused more clearly on religious identity and practice.

Religious Aspects of Catholic School Identity

When discussing the identity of the school, teachers, administrators, and parents all referenced tenets of the Catholic faith as central. But these aspects of Catholic identity manifested in multiple ways, as different stakeholders understood differently the relationship between Catholicism and the life of the school. These Catholic foundations informed the school's Catholic identity by motivating decisions, including decisions referenced above regarding community formation, curriculum, and interactions between the school, families, and students.

Below, I discuss these several perspectives, including the conception of identity as adherence to the doctrines and teachings of the Church, prayer as the practice of identity, the role of Christian anthropology, the role of a Logos-centered Catholic epistemology, and a priority for catechesis and explicit teaching of the faith.

Identity as Adherence to the Church

The Catholic Church is a hierarchical organization with doctrines and rituals promulgated across the world. This organizational structure creates some universality in the implementation of Catholic identity, since consistent magisterial teaching gives each school the same guidance, and therefore the same general objectives for Catholic identity. An Archdiocesan official described her role as ensuring that this guidance is clear:

I would say that my most important role that I make is to ensure that all policy directives that come out of my office are in keeping with the Catholic Church and the tenets of the Catholic Church, that focus on, not only academic excellence, but a strong Catholic identity focus. (Archdiocesan Official)

Underneath the magisterial authority of the Church as a global institution is the diocese, or in larger areas, an Archdiocese, such as the Archdiocese which encompasses Sacred Heart School. A diocese is governed by a bishop, who can set particular rules regarding curriculum, assessment, and the implementation of Catholic identity in the

schools that he oversees. Sacred Heart's classical curriculum is unique in its Archdiocese, so they use their own curriculum, but they must remain within Archdiocesan standards:

Sacred Heart is an Archdiocesan school. So there is still expectation of following Archdiocesan policy but they are a classic curriculum. So they use their own curriculum. And so that oversight comes directly from the superintendent. (Archdiocesan Official)

Under these ecclesial authorities, the school not only teaches academics, but also catechesis, or teaching about faith. This includes sacramental preparation, such as preparing second graders for their First Communion:

Our purpose is to prepare the kids for First Communion along with their classroom teachers. We take half of their class. So we have their students, one time with the other half. But we've told them and they know what our program is. We've been really lucky because both of the second grade teachers are trained in Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, so they know exactly what we're doing. (Teacher 1)

The school also introduces students to some of the many faith traditions and cultural traditions that are uniquely Catholic, as a way to inculturate an explicitly Catholic community:

Right, and we do something similar for Our Lady of Guadalupe. We'll have Mass. I think we do a rosary procession. We've had, in the past few years, a little Spanish choir. Maybe like three or four people come to sing traditional

folk songs to Mary. We try to find ways, Catholic devotions. To bring into the school year. (Pastor)

Even for some Catholics, these explicitly Catholic traditions and practices may be unfamiliar, and may be perceived as extreme, particularly for parents who grew up in a post-Vatican II American Church that promoted ecumenism over these uniquely Catholic practices and therefore didn't expose children to them. As one parent said:

I would agree with that, but as someone who grew up Catholic, the culture there is - I don't want to use a word extreme but it's more regimented, maybe it is a better way to put it than what I'm accustomed to. Growing up, I did all my sacraments, I was an altar boy, I did all those things and it is something different so even if I was talking to somebody I knew who had the same life experiences, I would tell them that. Just anticipate that it's different. (Parent 3)

This perception of religious excess can cause tension with non-Catholic families in particular, especially as some Protestant families might have contradictory beliefs and values. One teacher recalled:

Years ago I had a student in my class who came from a Bible believing family, Evangelical family, and I was teaching about the Immaculate Conception. And he stood up very powerfully, and this was a kind of a quiet child, but he became passionate on the subject, telling me that Mary was just an ordinary girl. That's what his grandmother had told them, that Mary was just an ordinary girl. And so I talked to [former principal] because this child was

communicating with such strenuous energy. And I wasn't sure how to handle it, but she said, I think you should call his mother and talk it over with her, but tell her that we will teach the Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. So, I had a great conversation with his mother and became friends with her. They've now moved away, but it was tricky, because he was receiving this very, very strong message from his grandmother who was maybe threatened by what we were teaching but it's as you just said, we had to present the truth of our faith. (Teacher 1)

The school participates in these moments of tension because the school sees active theological formation as one of its core purposes. Many of the teachers in the school participate in this formation because they believe the tenets of the Catholic faith and wish to share them as truth to their students. On occasion, some students who are exposed to these ideas find truth in them, leading to the conversion of the student and potentially of the family:

And the parents can follow and that has happened, we had a child baptized last year. He was in first grade, he was not baptized... He was the one who led the way toward communion with the Church, which is really beautiful. Yeah, so that can happen, but most children, if their parents are not practicing, are clearly not believers. The children take that with them and they'll cooperate with our activities, but they'll say things like, my parents don't believe any of this. You'll hear that. But you still hope that you're planting a seed with them, if you accept where they are and just try to witness to the faith. That's the

best you can do. But I don't know if I say the vast majority but I would be tempted to say that most of our families do come from believing, do have the Catholic faith in the home. I don't know our percentages. (Teacher 1)

Sacred Heart fulfills its educational mission by placing students in the care of faithful teachers and administrators, but faith is also taught explicitly. One parent identified this catechetical mission as the most important priority of the school:

Teaching about God, absolutely. Teaching in general, but their most important priority is teaching about the faith. (Parent 1)

Teachers at Sacred Heart were convinced that this catechetical project was deeply connected to the salvation of individual students. Not in a gnostic sense, in which the knowledge itself saves, but rather in the sense that knowledge of the faith encourages the full acceptance of the gifts of the Spirit, which then leads to the fruits of good works and service:

We want to have our children and our families be able to work together to help form the students to be the best people that they personally can be. And they all come through that with the truth. We want to get them to see where everything is going towards which is to be their salvation up into heaven. But as they do that they're also along the way; it's not just telling them, okay, you have to do ABC to be able to get there. We're trying to help guide them and to give them opportunities in order to do that themselves, whether it be in terms of service to others within the school itself taking that outside of the school, even like with the Martin Luther King, the projects that the families

have started the past few years during that day to not only let it be a day off with the children and to go have fun, but to actually do something to bring back and to understand what his mission was. And that's what we want to continue to do as well. (Teacher 3)

This mission of teaching about faith is core to the identity of Sacred Heart, not only because it is central, but also because it distinguishes Catholic schools from secular schools. One teacher argued that the integrity of the Church's mission - academics and catechesis combined - allowed teachers there to provide their students with a more coherent set of values, which in turn led to a better education overall:

We're able to bring faith. And that's the basis behind everything that we do in our truth behind it all. So for us, I think that is helpful to bring our children to a different level. I have many family members that are also teachers in the public school system, a few that are in private, and just to hear the struggle with some of the ones that are in the public school system because they're not able to bring in a particular set or type of values and things with the children. They're not able to get to the same level as we are with some of ours. Not saying academically, but just spiritually, it just gives another aspect for the children to be able to fall back on as well. (Teacher 3)

Each of these reports of participating in Catholic practices, traditions, and theological debate indicate that members of the school community identify with religious aspects that are particular to Catholicism, and that the school understands active faith formation as a core part of its Catholic school identity. Some families and students might

push back on particular tenets of the faith of the Church, but few disagreed that catechesis was a central goal of the school.

Prayer as Practice of Identity

Christian schools often manifest their identity through the practice of prayer. In the Catholic church, prayer can take many forms, including daily intentions, prayers for intercessions from saints, and more formal prayers, such as the rosary:

They are intertwined in everything they do. Praying before meals. Just being good people. I don't think there's bullying in the school. They're doing it already. Adoration Fridays, teaching children the rosary. They pray often, often for each other. (Parent 1)

Prayer is more than a Catholic practice, more than even a Christian practice, but the practice of prayer in a religious school certainly serves as a major distinguishing factor of these schools from non-religious schools, which are constrained by constitutional rulings:

We proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, and we're not apologetic for it. And you can see that in our respect when we pray in the morning. You can see that in our gratitude for our freedom when we're saying the Pledge of Allegiance, when we pray before we eat, when we pray before we dismiss school. Many of our schools pray mid-afternoon. We give thanks and glory to God for all things, the gift of knowledge, the gift of life, the gift of family, and the gift of

community. That is a stark difference from our public school brothers and sisters. (Archdiocesan Official)

In the Church, the most important form of prayer is the Mass (and relatedly, the Eucharistic practice known as adoration), most important because of the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, in which the bread and wine of communion is literally transformed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ and is therefore itself an object of worship. Participating in these particularly Catholic liturgies is closely connected to the Catholic identity of the school:

Well they would do that with, what's your prayer life of the school? Do the kids go to adoration? Is there adoration? How often do they have Mass? ... The greatest insult is to say a Catholic school is just a public school with a crucifix on the wall. And go to Mass once a week. And that's not Catholic identity. (Pastor)

The dismissive claim of a “public school with a crucifix on the wall” indicates the pastor’s belief that some Catholic schools *claim* Catholic identity but that practices like adoration are what actually grant a school its true Catholic identity. Given this definition, the school stakes its claim to participating in prayer at a level that heightens its Catholic identity, both corporate prayer that includes the entire school, and more personal prayer that happens at the individual or classroom level:

I think there has to be a balance between things that are prescribed and rote and things that are very natural. Then, when things don't go your way, I think you need to always include the Faith as a remedy to, maybe how you got there

in the first place. So, we pray over the intercom at the start of the day and the end of the day, we go to Mass once a week at a minimum, sometimes twice a week depending on feast days. We have adoration every Friday. So those are things that are scheduled and practiced, that are known. But then there's natural things, that classes will take a rosary walk around the block, they'll go make a visit to the chapel if something is hard or difficult or if things are just really good. Certainly in the times of trial and difficulty when there's bad news to deliver it comes across through prayer and through discussion. So I think there needs to be an open balance of natural things to take place. I've happened on classes numerous times where they're just praying in their classroom as a class on their own, and they're just offering free intentions saying, guys, what do you want to pray for? And I think that that becomes a habitual form of prayer and then understanding the role of a prayer and how it's lived out in their given day. (Principal)

Prayer, then, is a multifaceted tenet of the Catholic faith, less a practice than a collection of practices that all serve to orient the school as a whole or individual participants in a religious direction. Notably, prayer itself is not unique to Catholicism, but certain prayers and prayer practices are. To this end, a particular emphasis for the connection between prayer and Catholic identity is regularity; the more common the prayers, the more central they seem to the identity and life of the school:

The prayer disciplines. I think the liturgy. The reminders. I like around Lent and around Easter, that whole process that reminds us just about the

Crucifixion and the whole process, a lot of them and stuff like the Stations of the Cross, those are things that I didn't know about until my kids have been here, and they're kind of educated me on it. So I think they're good reminders. The weekly going to Mass. I have never been to a Mass and maybe I have once or twice but I don't quite remember. I think the weekly Mass routine is a good one, just reminding you about God, and centering your life on God. The morning prayer every day that they see, and at the beginning of the day and at the end of the day, I think just that the rhythms bring in God and make sure that God remains the focus for the children even as they learn.

(Parent 2)

Prayer disciplines connect individuals to the Church, both in how they are practiced as well as where and when. The Catholic Church sets a clear rhythm to these practices, in order to encourage universality and therefore Catholic identity. Teachers in the school then connect these formal prayers through their regularity of where and when to the underlying foundations of faith. To them, the formal and the spiritual are connected and interdependent:

The calendar's downstairs in the hallway, because you are here and there and it's moving around, the circular calendar. One of the things about the Catholic identity that I think is really key is the faith-filled staff. So there's a focus on hiring joyful witnesses, faith-filled people, young people who know the faith. It's amazing. The staff here is amazing. And you know, when I was in public schools, it was something like are you certified, and here, it's like you can

work to be certified. Somebody said, to be a teacher, you must first be a witness. Something along those lines. Mr. [Principal] knows the line. He says it at our staff meetings, but you're a witness first and then... so it's just all over, the faith is all over. People live the faith, teachers stand, circle in prayer before the bell rings. I mean you just see this right? You see this. Yeah, that's tremendous. It is amazing. (Teacher 2)

These prayers are not only seen as central elements of the Sacred Heart students' religious lives, but also as an act of service to the community. The school asks students to serve the community through prayer, which further connects the community to the practice of prayer:

Our older students, we have a tradition in the school whenever somebody that has a connection to the school passes away and there's a funeral service here at the parish, that we send over a class to attend the funeral. So that's kind of unplanned, but planned in the sense of kids need to see that. We usually send over seventh or eighth graders. We're not sending over first graders to that but it's an extension of the faith of part of this, the corporal work of mercy of burying the dead, it's a real thing. And if you never see that or never experienced that it can be lost on you. (Principal)

In the above example, students at Sacred Heart participate in funerals of parishioners not for transactional reasons, such as in service of recruiting or even in gratitude for the parish's support, but rather as an attempt to satisfy one of the seven corporal works of mercy. Seeing these funerals as a responsibility serves to more closely

tether the school to the local community, at least to the local Catholic community, and seeing these funerals as a teaching opportunity further communicates to the students that participating in these kinds of communities is an essential element of the Catholic faith. Thus, the relationship between Catholic identity and school identity is strengthened.

One parent shared an anecdote where she felt she was asking her family to participate in prayer that was above and beyond the normal prayer routine, but was surprised to find that the school had already done the very same prayers that day:

We do the youth group, at Sacred Heart, my husband and I thought, wouldn't it be great to have them do the Stations of the Cross one time during Lent and just have the youth group do this? And they were all so sweet, and we totally did it and it was great, and then later one of them mentioned, that's the second time I did that today, and I was like, my gosh, they weren't rude at all. They were so great, but they totally just did that in school and then did it again tonight and nobody complained. That's amazing. But they just do that. It's like all this stuff is happening, and I don't even know most of it, but things like that'll happen. I was saying we should have confession during Lent sometime for youth group, and they're like, we could but we have it every week in school. So oh, never mind. So I feel like I find out about it. It's like the school's not super braggy about we went to Mass, we said the rosary, we did the Litany of the Saints. We're like, we do this stuff all the time okay, this is great. (Parent 4)

The Catholicity of these prayer practices reinforces a tension I have referenced throughout this chapter, between the desire to include non-Catholic students and the connection between strong Catholic identity and agreement among stakeholders about core values. While these prayers may be reinforcing for the prayer life of Catholic students, they risk alienating non-Catholic families and students. But one non-Catholic parent claimed that Protestant students could find value in the more generally Christian elements of the prayer life of the school:

I don't know too many of the Catholic religious practices, so I'll talk about it from a Christian perspective. I think that the praying that they already are doing, and the discipline, I think just reminding them because this is what I do with them. Reminding them what God expects them to do. What does God expect from you today? God expects you to work hard, to be kind to others, to be obedient to your teachers and to the people in authority. So that's what I would expect from them. And that's what I would expect an ideal classroom to have. (Parent 2)

The above quote reinforces the Christian belief that prayer is bidirectional, that prayer allows individuals to communicate their needs and intentions to God, but also that God interacts with and affects what happens on Earth through His divine Providence. According to one teacher, the prayer life of the school has had more than a practical effect on the school's identity, but has also affected the school in a Providential way, by asking for and receiving God's guidance in a time of transition:

I've been thinking about this [why I came to Sacred Heart] and I'd have to say prayer. I say that because even in my first interview with [former principal] in 2010 - I interviewed with her in April, and then was hired and began working in August - she was clearly a leader who relied on prayer and she was looking for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. She made that clear and the fact that I had been recommended by my son and daughter's friend, who was a priest. He had been living at the Rectory at Sacred Heart, so he recommended me to her. She was looking for things to fall into her lap kind of as a response to prayer. I mean, so rather than just going through a pile of resumes, she was praying and hoping to be guided by the Holy Spirit. So she considered that phone call to be a guidance of sorts.

She was open to talking to me. And then I learned and I also met with [former pastor] in that interview. And shortly thereafter, I think I learned that they had dedicated the school to Our Lady of Guadalupe and they were making, kind of weekly mini pilgrimages to the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe to pray for the school. Because the school was, speaking of vulnerability, with a high debt and low enrollment. They were on the verge of closure which I'm sure, so [former pastor] and [former principal], they really stepped out in faith, and they prayed hard. And their prayers were answered. Yeah, we used to pray a novena in the spring for applicants. We would just really hope it, but we'd be praying this novena in order to ask our Lord to send students because we really needed them. It was a tough time for the school's finances.

(Teacher 1)

One teacher particularly credited both the current principal and the former principal with instituting such a strong prayer life of the school, and with explicitly connecting that prayer to Catholic anthropological ideas of the dignity of the human person:

So I think we have the guidance of our faith tradition on the dignity of the human person, and treating every person, every student in our classroom with respect and dignity, which I'm sure every school does but we really try to live that out but I'd say we do that with different models. I have a certain model of discipline that I really like, that I've taught others teachers to do and many have done it but it's not universal. So we all have our own approaches to classroom management but I would say one thing that with both principals has been that kind of leadership of prayer. For instance, going over to adoration on Fridays, which many teachers do. I did occasionally, but with first grade I don't know was appropriate as it was for older grades. But also just the permission to do that, encouragement if there's a time in the day when you can just stop and pray a decade of the rosary with the kids, which I did. Just that kind of the whole assumption that living our faith is the first priority. Of course we want to have a certain number of math minutes as a math teacher would certainly appreciate but that's not the top priority. It's very important, but you can stop everything to pray if that's what you think needs to happen. (Teacher 1)

The idea here is not only that prayer distinguishes religious schools from non-religious schools, but that prayer is metaphysically effective and connected to a particularly religious understanding of the human person. The authentic faith in these principles is what provides the foundation for a school built on the practice of prayer.

Catholic Identity through Anthropology

From a religious perspective, all theories of education must be rooted in a certain conception of the human person. For thinkers like Jacques Maritain, education begins with the individual and elevates them to personhood by interacting with what is divine within them, namely, their soul. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, this soul was implanted in humanity by God at creation, as humans were made in the image and likeness of God. This perspective has endured as a foundational tenet of the Catholic tradition, and emerged in the comments of several community members. As the principal put it:

We speak a lot about Christian anthropology. You have to understand the way the human person is made and the church has spoken for eons about this and hasn't really wavered in its understanding of how the human person is formed. (Principal)

This concept imbues each student with infinite and irreducible dignity. Because all humans have this same divine spark, they can recognize it as present in other humans. The natural response is therefore one of love, which in Catholic tradition is defined as “willing the good of the other for his or her own sake”:

Here at Sacred Heart Academy, it's important for them to know that [students] are treated no matter where they are from, no matter who they are, they're beings as humans, the development of who they are as humans, that they are made in the image of God, and that is one of the utmost important thing that we can arm the children with. Knowing that they are loved and they are made to be loved, for love and nobody can take that away from them. (Teacher 4)

Two key components of the *Imago Dei* anthropology impact education. First is a concept of *telos*, or the idea that there exists an ideal conception of what it means to be human (even if we humans have not yet fully understood and cannot fully articulate this ideal yet), and that the purpose of human life is to more and more closely approximate this ideal. This concept is the foundation of Sacred Heart's emphasis on objective concepts of truth, goodness, and beauty, and is at the root of the classical curriculum. So therefore a Christian anthropology informs an educational practice that manifests as a general desire that the student becomes the best version of herself:

So I think within the school itself, we have an intention that we are teaching to the whole child and it's not only for this particular level, but we're looking at the whole picture. So we want to be able to work with them and help guide them, inform them into being the best person they can be throughout not only their one year that they're with that one particular teacher, but if they're going to continue through our school and then when they leave us as well. (Teacher 3)

The second component of *Imago Dei* anthropology understands and recognizes brokenness, *i.e.* sin., In response to sin, the Church in general, and Sacred Heart in specific, institute practices and curricula, respectively, that attempt to elevate individuals towards their divine personhood:

I think it's just, the Catholic base of knowledge and the Catholic morals lead to the development of the person first. I think it's actually a very direct connection between the Catholic classical curriculum and just the morals of being a good person, and what does that mean and having answers for what that means. So I think that's a good base of knowledge and providing answers to the questions and reasons behind the answers to the questions that are difficult to answer. So I think right now I've been happy with how Sacred Heart has used Catholicism in our curriculum. I mean, it's central, and I think it should be, it's a Catholic school. (Parent 5)

Despite its impossibility, the Christian perspective claims knowledge of what it means to be a “good” person; that is, the Church claims objective moral knowledge. This claim not only has anthropological roots in the *Imago Dei*, but also metaphysical and epistemological roots in the Gospel of John.

John's Gospel begins: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” In the original Greek, the word used for “Word” is *Logos*, the root of our English word “logic” today. In a Trinitarian metaphysics, Jesus as the Word means not that He was created by God, but that He is the means through which the world was

created, since in Genesis the world was created through an act of speech. Understanding Christ as the Logos connects the act of creation to the anthropology of the *Imago Dei*:

I think of the Logos. Right, God himself, and Jesus, because without Him, the Salvation part, and the children know this the minute that they come in. They realize the importance of who they are because they are dignified beings, and there's so much that's coming at them. And as long as they are here and they realize that they are important no matter who they are, what walks of life they're from, that they are important, that they are God's creation, and they are treated the same as everyone else. So realizing that they are dignified beings like everyone else. (Teacher 4)

In an educational context, the concept of the Logos motivates learning, because it is only through God's creative act that a world exists for us to study at all, and it is only because we are made in His image that we are capable of understanding it. The Logos implies that Truth is objective, independent of our perspective on it. And this approach runs counter to many postmodern epistemological theories that are popular in the secular world today:

It's because we believe in Truth. Society does not, everything's relative. We believe that things are objectively Good. The rest of the world says no. We believe there is something known as Beauty and things are Beautiful. And everything else, the modern world says it's subjective. There is no Truth, there is no Goodness, there is no Beauty. And so as Catholics we say no, these are gifts from God himself. These are qualities of God. He's Good, True and

Beautiful. And so every time we explore those, we are actually exploring God, or the Divine. (Pastor)

Animals can be trained through behavioristic conditioning, but in a Christian perspective these animals can never truly *learn* because the pursuit of Truth (and Goodness and Beauty) is the pursuit of the Logos, the desire for which only comes from the *Imago Dei*. The British philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once wrote that “the essence of education is that it be religious... A religious education is an education which inculcates duty and reverence. Duty arises from our potential control over the course of events. Where attainable knowledge could have changed the issue, ignorance has the guilt of vice. And the foundation of reverence is this perception, that the present holds within itself the complete sum of existence, backwards and forwards, that whole amplitude of time, which is eternity.” This perspective implies that all learning, not just learning about religion, is an act of worship:

So I think for Sacred Heart, it has been an endeavor to understand that identity is who we are fundamentally, not simply what we do. And that the question of who we are, then, is a question of integrity, of integrating this vision of life, this vision of Jesus Christ as Logos throughout a rich curriculum. What's very freeing about this is it's not a question of telling teachers, well you have to connect every single lesson you do somehow to religion. Because that's often very artificial, and then they'll try to do it. No, you don't have to do that, you're not the one connecting. What you're doing is revealing the truth. You're revealing the nature of reality that these things are deeply

connected. And the goal at Sacred Heart I think is we see this also, I would say, more so than ever before. And I was at Sacred Heart a very long time before it moved into this different educational approach. More than ever, there's a strong sense of the continuum throughout the grades that we understand that a student is journeying through Sacred Heart Academy as part of what we hope will be a lifelong desire to learn and a lifelong love of what's True, Good and Beautiful. (Former Principal)

In the Catholic perspective, students must learn not only because learning what is true is a component to learning about the Truth, but also because humans themselves are eternally broken by the Fall. The Church's doctrine of sin explains that we live in a broken world, and that our natural desires are selfish and destructive. But a strong focus on the Logos can, through education, prepare students to "go out and proclaim the good news." (Teacher 4)

Because it is so connected to the core mission of the school, and because it is so often articulated by the teachers and administrators who implement that mission, an *Imago Dei* anthropology and its corresponding concept of Christ as Logos are central to the school's Catholic identity.

The School as Institution

I have argued previously that while education may be considered a practice (or perhaps a meta-practice), schools are institutions. Institutions do not pursue internal

goods, such as satisfaction at the formation of virtuous students, but rather pursue external goods, such as wealth and prestige. This is not to say the institution of a school seeks to be wealthy or prestigious for its own sake, but rather than a certain amount of wealth is necessary to pay for materials and salaries, and a certain amount of prestige is necessary to attract families and navigate the political landscape.

In this section, I detail three key elements of the school as an institution, each of which provide important context for the decisions the school and particularly the principal makes to support the school's Catholic identity. Specifically, I discuss the principal's leadership and organizational routines, the school's political relationships in a framework of subsidiarity, restrictions on finances, and restrictions on physical space. These institutional elements provide insight to the challenges the school must face as it seeks to construct its identity, and the process it uses to navigate these challenges.

Principal's Leadership

Each of the explicit actions that created, supported, and maintained the school's Catholic identity in the sections above was the result of a decision, or a series of decisions, by members of the school. Teachers make many decisions to interpret the school's policies in the presence of individual students, but the key decision makers that set those policies themselves are the principal and the pastor.

The pastor's primary role is to select the principal, and that process involved prayer and explicit attention to the school's Catholic identity, a process that permanently associated the principal and his future decisions with the Catholic identity of the school:

Here's the story: when [Former Principal], she resigned in 2016 and she had the position with ICLE, I was on the committee that was interviewing for the new principal and we met three or four times with Fr. [Pastor] and several people from the parish council and the community, the parents and the teachers. So anyway, we got down to two candidates before I had to go to Rome. My husband and I went to Rome with our son, who's a Dominican priest... And I really wanted [Principal] to get the job, but I wasn't at all confident about it. I thought he was for sure more suited for the job than the other candidate. But I didn't know what decision Fr. [Pastor] would make because we only made a recommendation. So we got to Santa Sabina in Rome which is the historic Dominican church in Rome... And my son asked if there were any prayer intentions we especially wanted to ask, to put forth. And I said, okay, I just really want to pray that [Principal] gets the principal job. He said, all right, my son, he was at Steubenville with [Principal]. They were classmates at Steubenville. A few days later, my daughter texted and said that [Principal] was hired. We're good because we needed him to continue to support the mission of the school. And the other candidate did not understand the mission of the school. So it was very important and I was thinking about my grandchildren who were going to the school. We need this

to be supported and led by the right person, someone who's totally bought in as [Principal] was. (Teacher 1)

In this way, both the pastor and the principal were connected to the school's Catholic identity, at least in the mind of Teacher 1 and other stakeholders who felt similarly. Such connections build buy-in of trust when the principal eventually makes difficult decisions, particularly with Catholic identity in mind.

I have documented above various leadership decisions that the principal or former principal made and that the principal continues to make in an effort to build the school's Catholic identity, including the decision to financially prioritize large families, individual disciplinary decisions, and the ongoing interview-based admissions process. But here, I detail one specific moment of leadership that serves to illustrate the ways in which the school's Catholic identity and the institutional needs of the school intersect with leadership, decision making, and organizational concepts like authority and legitimacy.

Leadership skill impacts organizations the most during times of crisis, the most salient recent example of which was the Covid pandemic. The principal and administrative team decided and acted quickly:

Definitely. During Covid, hands down. It was during Covid that we were told on Friday - it was March 13th - that we need to close. The whole world was shutting down. So we immediately went into action with the help of [Principal] and the administration and the teachers all jumped on for one weekend that weekend. (Teacher 4)

According to organizational theory, acts of leadership are most demanding when they work against established organizational routines, both those set below by practitioners, and above by regulators. The pastor described the decision making process in these conditions as difficult, and demanding of leadership, particularly from the principal:

No, we just were trying to find the middle ground. What was required by the state or the county? It could be we followed the directions without following to an extreme... Okay, I'll take that back. For me, there were not a lot of decisions. For the school, how do you teach our method or under these restraints? That was, that required a lot of thought, talking and change
(Pastor)

Those decisions made by the administrative team at that time centered the values of the school. Identity serves here as the answer to the question, what would Sacred Heart do? Other schools might have reacted to the crisis in spring 2020 differently, because those schools had different value systems, different histories, and different identities. Sacred Heart's decision was one that, for the administrative team, was in character to its identity:

We made the decision that we are going to remain open, that we're going to serve our children by going online, something that we don't use. We don't use technology as part of our academics or the part of who we are. But we see the need that was needed at that time to make that call. So we put that aside but only aim to serve the children. There has to be some consistency as the world is falling apart. So that decision was made by all of us. Not one person said I

don't want to be in it because the goal is to serve the children. That was our goal. So doing that time, it did not stop us from moving and creating a program in which to serve the children, and the parents. So that was very assuring for us that we were able to remain open the whole time. No, we were able to assimilate and create schedules that meet the children's needs and the parents. So that was a hard decision to make, because of where the world was at that time, but I would not have changed it one bit. (Teacher 4)

In this way, the leadership decisions of the school derived from conceptions of identity rather than attempts to build legitimacy with families or the state. No stakeholders reported that they disagreed with Sacred Heart's decision to remain as open as possible during the pandemic (the school taught virtually for the remainder of the spring, then opened for hybrid learning the following fall, earlier than county schools did), so I cannot make the claim either that this decision represented leadership attempting to gain legitimacy or that it sacrificed legitimacy in favor of living up to the school's values; rather, it seems that both the leadership team and the community have bought so fully into the school's values that no real tension existed between identity and legitimacy in this instance. I will expand on this idea more in the next chapter.

Subsidiarity

Schools, like any organization, are subject to political forces; decisions must be made, and it matters who makes these decisions and who those decisions affect. Catholic social teaching offers a principle (“subsidiarity”) that governs these political forces, such

that the decision should be made by the competent person or group that is closest to those affected. So for instance, decisions about standardized assessments might be made at the Archdiocesan level, since if different schools made different assessment decisions, then the value of standardization would be lost. But in the spirit of subsidiarity, such a decision would necessarily gain input from those affected:

I will say that one of the beauties of the Catholic Schools office for the Archdiocese that maybe I haven't seen in other dioceses, is that there is a huge respect for school leaders. And so, usually a policy is not implemented without the voice of the school principals being heard as part of that discernment process. That could be via survey, focus group, interviews with the principals to make sure that whatever it is we're doing, their voice is represented... I think that I've not seen any [pushback] in my short tenure there, and having to roll out a new standardized assessment tool, to roll out a teacher evaluation platform. I've not seen pushback from school leaders because their voice is a part of the process. That they have buy-in.
(Archdiocesan Official)

But most policy decisions only affect the schools themselves; there does not seem to be a push to define the Catholic identity of the Archdiocese, but rather Catholic identity is sourced at the school level. As a result, the school mostly exists independent of the decisions of the Archdiocese. At the school level, some decisions are made by the principal because they affect the entire school, but according to the principle of subsidiarity, decisions that only affect a class are left to the individual teachers. Similar to the

relationship between the Archdiocese and schools, when the principal of Sacred Heart makes decisions, he seeks input and buy-in from those affected, while still accepting that school-wide decisions lie at the principal level. The principal gave an example of changing the literacy program as such a decision, because it affected more than just one classroom:

We try to be as delicate as possible and try to have a consensus. It's not a democratic vote, but it's moreso to say we've discerned and weighed all of the possible factors. I'll give an example to a couple things here. One was our phonics program. This was a couple years ago. We saw that we had somewhat of a disjointed program that wasn't really speaking of a classical nature, and it wasn't integrated across the various aspects of language arts, meaning we had a spelling program here, we had a phonics program here, that we had a separate writing program, and they weren't talking to each other and it was creating confusion for the teachers and the kids and the families. So we need to fix this. So we didn't just grab a new program off the shelf. We actually created a subcommittee that included administrative department heads and teachers, and we met for months. And we tried to analyze the root problem that we were trying to solve before even looking at solutions to it. And then we tested, we actually piloted one aspect of a program for one school year and we found halfway through the school year, this is not us. So we actually went back to what we were doing previously, and then we brought the committee in and say okay, we know that was not the answer, we need to go back to work. And it took another six months to find the program now that we've been using the last two years called Literacy

Essentials and we really feel like that's a more intrinsic, integrated program that meets the needs of everything else that we're doing. (Principal)

This example illustrates how he approaches key decisions, by blending both a democratic, bottom-up process that seeks stakeholder buy-in, and then by accepting responsibility for the decision as someone with authority. This approach is informed by the principle of subsidiarity.

The principal then gave another example of a situation where he had to make a decision that affected the entire school, namely the rebalancing of time commitments between specials and core classes. The insights he gave to his process directly matched the political principle of subsidiarity:

Another thing is last year we saw once we peeled back all of the schedule changes from Covid and all the stuff we found that we had too many loves and we actually started counting minutes of particular subject matters in categories. And we found that there was an imbalance across the board, and we were deciding that whenever we love something or want to add something on, it gets its own class period every week. And what ended up happening is all these other things were being negated in the process. So we met about this as a faculty through the spring, had a lot of conversations about this and kind of polled the teachers towards the end of the year and basically told them for next year, we're going to realign the curriculum. Let the schedule, we're gonna realign it so it's far more balanced. So we're going to put things in rotation, so you're not losing them four times a week for

these, let's say elective type classes, you'd be at least in them twice a week. And they'd be on a rotation because we want to safeguard these minutes for these core classes. We kind of did that by a larger committee and then, there were certain people that I pulled into my office, like veteran teachers, and people that I knew had strong feelings, but also some intricate ways to solve it. And I threw some options to them outside of the whole committee and said, what do you think, would this solve our problem? Will this fix it? Before going back to the full group. (Principal)

As a result, teachers report feeling trusted, not because they have direct say or voting power for these decisions, but rather because they believe that those who do make these decisions listen to their opinions. Trust is essential to the development of authority through the development of legitimacy for the principal's leadership in the eyes of teachers and other stakeholders:

I've always felt respected. I've always felt listened to. I've never felt like there's been a disconnect. I said we are just a united staff. Maybe others have but I just haven't seen that. (Teacher 2)

This approach is certainly not unique to Catholic schools, but the pressures of a public school bureaucracy might make an approach rooted in subsidiarity less likely:

So, just in contrast to the oppressive test readiness environment that I had. Although there were many wonderful people in the public school where I taught, of course. But what was assumed as soon as I started working at Sacred Heart was that I was a capable and responsible teacher who would do

everything I needed to do to deliver this very inspiring, but demanding curriculum to the children. Basically I was trusted, the teachers are trusted and not checked up on. The principals would drop in occasionally, briefly, I don't know, and I guess some years we have observations. That would be written not every year but it wasn't under your thumb approach. I had wonderful principals in the public school, but the whole way it was set up is that there was pressure on the teachers, pressure to succeed in and the various hoops that you had to jump through. And in this school, that pressure was not there. We didn't have to prepare and show lesson plans, for instance, it was just assumed that we were doing lesson plans. I just felt like this real trust, which gave me an incentive to make it happen, because I think trust is freeing and motivating. (Teacher 1)

Indeed, many Catholic schools struggle with these political dynamics as well. I asked the former principal, who is now an advocate for a nationwide Catholic education group, whether Catholic identity develops more readily because of the will of leaders or because of a groundswell of support from families, and she said both are necessary precisely because of the logic of subsidiarity:

Yeah, I think that the secret sauce is somewhere in the middle, and here's why. I have had the experience of working with schools where there was great groundswell of support for something, but perhaps an unwilling pastor or an unwilling principal, it did not go anywhere without those in leadership being ready to do this. On the other hand, I have had experiences where...

what we do at ICLE, what they continue to do very well, is to advise and help people guide people through a process. So that if a pastor decides this is the direction he wants to go in, there's a way to begin that process and there are ways that are not helpful. So, I've seen it fail because pastors have said we're doing this next year. Be ready. Get on board or get out of the way. And that doesn't usually work out very well either. (Former Principal)

So Catholic identity depends on the willingness and support at all levels, from leaders, from teachers, and from families. Sacred Heart has a strong identity because its leaders have made decisions for the school that push it in the direction of Catholic identity, because its teachers design their classes with Catholic identity as a central aspect of both their curriculum and their pedagogy, and because the intentionally built community of families choose to be a part of a school with a strong Catholic identity. It is precisely this community-wide support that makes Sacred Heart's Catholic identity so strong and so sustainable.

Financial Restrictions

All organizations must make decisions about how to allocate scarce resources; for schools, the resources most likely to be scarce are money, time, and classroom space, which I discuss below. Money as a school resource is used to pay teachers' salaries (thereby lowering class sizes), acquire materials, and support teaching through professional development. Most of the money Sacred Heart uses for these purposes comes from tuition. Back when the school was suffering from low enrollment, the limited financial resources

filled allocation decisions with risk, a risk that has been alleviated recently with the school's growing popularity:

That was almost a constant concern. And ironically, I was just talking about this a little while ago, and it's not that a movement in this direction is in itself costly. I mean, you're gonna have costs affiliated with professional development. Now, you're just gonna be paying a different group to come in, it's not that was so extreme. Here's what was different: in this new approach, we had for the first time a unified nature studies program, so we've never had a distinct science teacher, that's an extra salary. Then, at the time I was concerned about offering support to kids who might struggle with such a very rich language-based approach. So we wanted a resource teacher. We did not have the finances necessarily to afford these things. However, it was a question of chicken and the egg. If I don't take the risk and hire this teacher and actually demonstrate that we're very serious, families will look at this and say, all this new language, but it's basically the same stuff they've been doing. So Fr. [Former Pastor], then pastor, and I both felt like, look let's just go for it. And so, we were dragging, when we went a little deeper into debt, the school was already in debt and almost closed. We had to go a little deeper in debt in order to bring those things on, but over time, they paid off and the finances at the school have stabilized, and actually are doing quite well from what I understand. (Former Principal)

Most private schools, Catholic schools included, accumulate money through tuition, although some of the money that supports schools like Sacred Heart can come from state funding, such as need-based vouchers and technology support programs:

I think that we have a wonderful office of general counsel that works with the [State] Catholic Conference that interprets the laws of the State to see what we can and cannot do to support our schools through state funding. And they do a very good job educating us on that process. (Archdiocesan Official)

I note below that the school is pursuing a capital campaign to expand the building and develop the space around the building. But these pursuits involve more than allocations of space, they involve decisions about how to acquire these funds and how to allocate them, including hiring designers and approving proposals. That process is fundamentally political, which can cause tension along several lines of dispute. One parent reported to me that the committee charged with overseeing this expansion process did not reflect the population of the school:

Let me give you another example. You know the project they're trying to raise money to build to expand the school. So we were asked to be a part of it, and that part for the fundraising part, and when I went to the meeting I looked around there were 30 families there and since [my wife] wasn't there with me, it was just me that night, there were zero people of color. It was all white people like me, and I was looking around saying, what's going on here? Why are we not incorporating our community and our community in the school is not that way. Even at Sacred Heart. So I was very confused by that. I said

something. I said something to the person running that campaign, and to Mr. [Principal], saying we need to expand this committee to include people of all backgrounds, so that is built into the core of why we're expanding and what we're expanding to do. And I like the fact that we're expanding, because now we're not going to have this waiting list problem where we can only bring in siblings of the current students, right? We have a problem. We don't have enough capacity for the demand for the school. But it was not inclusive of our whole community. (Parent 5)

It seems that the high enrollment has solved some problems, but has exacerbated others. The decisions of leadership are therefore different under this situation than under a situation with more limited finances. Though there are clear differences in priority and opinions on how to spend the marginal dollar, the community has a similarly high opinion of the school leadership team's decision making process for how to allocate those resources:

Okay, I think that it would change the school in that they would definitely do physical improvements that I know they want to do and they would just do a really good job with it. And I think that they would also want to meet the needs of the community and hire more teachers so they could bring in not only all the kids that are destined to be there because of their families already being connected, but maybe even a wider reach into the more secular community too. I think that they would welcome those kids if they had the classroom space and the teachers. And they'd probably want to pay their

teachers more so they could keep their teachers longer. Yeah, it's really going down the rabbit hole with what could happen, but it would really be very, very positive... I think they'd make really good decisions. I've always felt like they make really good decisions about that kind of thing, really smart. I can imagine they have a laundry list of updates that they would want to have made if they had the money. So I'm sure they would check off some boxes as I they forward. (Parent 3)

These comments reflect a trust in the leadership of the school that is rooted in the creation and maintenance of an intentional school community. That community is the source of the school's Catholic identity, but as shown here, it is also the source of the school's strength as an institution.

Conclusion

The above findings reflect only some of the many perspectives that form the Sacred Heart school community, but the breadth and depth of these interviews has given significant insight into the values and priorities of these individuals, and of the community as a whole. Because organizational identity is strengthened by a shared agreement on what aspects of the organization are central, distinct, and enduring, any assessment of the nature of identity must begin with the perspectives of diverse participants in the organization's identity.

In the previous chapter, I proposed three research questions regarding the Catholic school identity of Sacred Heart Academy. The first research question asks how community members perceive the school's Catholic identity; the findings above are rich with explicit statements of what each stakeholder believes is central, distinct, and enduring about the school. The second research question asks how community members' perceptions interact with the decisions of leadership; both leaders and participants shared their priorities, and shared how those priorities affected how they made and reacted to school policy decisions. And the third research question asks what challenges the school faces in maintaining its Catholic identity; not only do participants share how they attempt to balance identity against institutional goods like wealth and prestige, but they also describe the intrinsic challenges of supporting the school's pursuit of a strong Catholic identity.

In the next chapter, I will interpret the above findings through the lenses of organizational theory and the theory of practice in order to both draw meaning out of these data, and to answer these research questions.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

In this dissertation, my first paper, “Towards an Authentic Understanding of Catholic School Identity,” uses MacIntyre’s theory of practice to define Catholic school identity in terms of the pursuit of internal and external goods. My second paper, “Institutionalizing Internal Goods through Catholic School Identity,” serves as a literature review, in which I use organizational theory to understand how Catholic school identity is generally manifested in schools, and the challenges facing institutions that want to both survive and promote their identities. The purpose of this chapter is to connect the findings from the qualitative interview study I conducted on Sacred Heart Academy to the literature I analyzed in those two chapters so I can answer this study’s research questions.

Below, I divide this chapter into three main sections, one for each research question, followed by a discussion that identifies the significance of this analysis for future research on (and practice of) Catholic school identity. In the first section, I will connect Sacred Heart's stakeholders’ perceptions of the school’s Catholic identity to the various definitions of identity present in the literature. Note that different definitions relate to different findings, and so allow for different complex and comprehensive conclusions about Sacred Heart's identity. In the second section, I will connect the decisions of administrators and teachers to organizational theory, specifically the balance between the pursuit of identity and the pursuit of legitimacy. Note here that because legitimacy is a function of community beliefs, even though the section focuses on the decisions of the school, much of the analysis centers the reaction of parents and the surrounding community to those decisions. And in

the third section, I will connect challenges that Sacred Heart faces to the theory of practice, specifically the balance between the pursuit of internal and external goods. I will also center the role of the principal, who is often faced with decisions that cause him to choose between two competing demands of a strong Catholic identity.

Though I believe this chapter's conclusions have much to offer the field of research on Catholic school identity, there are limitations inherent in this study's approach. Below, I will present some factual conclusions that only apply to Sacred Heart, including perspectives of parents, teachers, and administrators in the Sacred Heart community that don't necessarily correlate to perspectives of other parents, other teachers, and other administrators at other schools. As a qualitative interview study, I cannot generalize any of the findings of this research to other schools in order to draw conclusions for future school policy. However, I will at the conclusion of this chapter present some general thoughts that extrapolate to a theory of Catholic school identity itself. Future research might use these conclusions as fertile ground for questions that can continue the development and sustenance of Catholic school identities.

Research Question 1: How do the members of the Sacred Heart Academy school community perceive its Catholic school identity?

As I explained in chapter 2, identity is what an organization *is* and what it is *not*. So Sacred Heart's Catholic school identity must simultaneously connect it to other Catholic schools and separate it from other types of (non-Catholic) organizations. Identity is both self-referential and perceived by a community, *i.e.* it is both what the organization thinks of

itself and what others think about it. This research question asks about the perceptions of the stakeholders within the Sacred Heart community, so I will not be explicitly referencing perceptions from outsiders, but these stakeholders frequently referenced their perceptions of others' beliefs, as well as their own beliefs before they joined the Sacred Heart community, both of which give some insight into the nature of the school's Catholic identity. This sense of boundaries is important to Sacred Heart, and likely to other private schools, because the community of stakeholders was self-selected by families and teachers who chose the school, at least in some part because of its identity.

The bases of community perception are those aspects of the organization that are central, distinct, and enduring (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Aspects that are central connect organizations with the same identity to each other, strengthening that identity by their connections to others with similar goals or similar backgrounds. Aspects that are distinct separate organizations with different identities, creating the boundaries that define organizational identity as an intelligible construct. In the answer to this research question, I will describe aspects that the Sacred Heart community perceives as central to their Catholic school identity, specifically its connections to and similarities to other Catholic schools. I will also describe the community's perceptions about the factors that separate Sacred Heart and other Catholic schools from other forms of school, particularly its Catholicity. And I will discuss how these factors have and have not endured over time, particularly how these factors have been affected by the fairly recent "renaissance" of the school and its participation in a classical curriculum.

I did not study other Catholic schools, so I cannot speak to specific differences between Sacred Heart and other schools who may have a strong but distinct approach to their Catholic school identity. I can, however, discuss the perceptions of Sacred Heart stakeholders and how they believe Sacred Heart distinguishes itself from other Catholic schools. Such identity is weakened if different stakeholders understand this identity differently: for example, if there are differences between the perceptions of parents and the perceptions of administrators and teachers in the school. And if Catholic school identity is both what connects Catholic schools to each other while simultaneously separating them from other forms of school, I argue that strong, articulable distinctions between Catholic schools undermine the strength of Catholic school identity in general. For Sacred Heart, such a distinction arises from the classical curriculum, and I discuss below the varied effects it has on the school's Catholic identity.

The Classical Curriculum and Narrative Identity

A primary source of organizational identity is a narrative, which is a story the organization tells itself about itself (Childers, 2012). For Sacred Heart, that story centers around the “renaissance” in 2010, whereby the former principal “saved” the school by transitioning to the classical curriculum from a more conventional Catholic school curriculum. Community members credit the classical curriculum with the school's turnaround, and therefore make the classical curriculum central to the identity of the school. But this story also separates the school from other Catholic schools, since the

school's renaissance was a rebirth *from* participating in the very Catholic school ethos that most Catholic schools still use today.

The story that creates the identity of Sacred Heart is one the members of the school community tell to make sense of objective facts - the transition to the classical curriculum, followed by a significant increase in the popularity of the school and financial security that had eluded the school before the transition. But this story has two implications that undermine its effectiveness as an identity construction tool. First, like many stories, it oversimplifies the many complex processes and events that led to the school's newfound success, including favorable press and decisions from both the pastor and principals that benefited the school in ways parallel to (but not necessarily contrary to) its mission. And second, one major effect of the event in the story is an increase in popularity and wealth, external goods that are not central to the school and therefore cannot be foundational to its identity. This effect in particular points to a subtle divide between the priorities held by administrators and teachers against priorities held by many parents, a tension I explain in more detail below.

Nevertheless, the renaissance narrative persists insofar as it corresponds with the Catholic intellectual tradition that the school wishes to participate in. Indeed, narratives are the source of organizational identity specifically because they form the connective tissue between traditions that give meaning to moral claims and grounded actions by individuals and organizations (MacIntyre, 1988). In the case of Sacred Heart, the classical model taps into *old* (i.e. classical) ideas, which gives them an aspect of endurance that contributes to their formation of a Catholic identity. In this way, Sacred Heart's identity is

conservative, not necessarily in a political sense, but in the sense that it prefers solutions developed by dispersed communities over time rather than technocratic solutions intentionally developed to solve modern problems, as with most modern curricula (McPherson, 2023). I argue that the endurance of the renaissance as a narrative identity for Sacred Heart relies at least in part on its connection to the Catholic intellectual tradition. This endurance is a feature of the classical nature of the curriculum itself; intentionally chosen and technocratic solutions may be quicker to address problems, but they are also less firmly anchored and therefore more quickly changed.

The Catholic intellectual tradition prioritizes a distinct set of values, among them objective truth, beauty, and goodness, and an anthropology that understands the human person as both made in the image of God and fundamentally broken by sin. These values have informed Catholic education for centuries (Boland, 2012) establishing beatitude (flourishing that is both uniquely human and teachable) as the proper end of education. Students are exposed to true, beautiful, and good ideas until these are the ideas they desire (Kristjansson, 2020). Though this enculturation of virtue is difficult, the Catholic tradition holds that it is essential for true freedom and dignity of the human person (Maritain, 1943).

Sacred Heart interprets its classical curriculum as central and distinct, and it claims the classical curriculum as a connection to the enduring educational tradition of the Church; if the classical curriculum is Catholic, then it is therefore a source of the school's Catholic identity. The source of the claim that the classical curriculum is particularly Catholic seems to be rooted in the historical facts that the classical curriculum imitates the curricula used by the Church for centuries. But that connection is insufficient to

demonstrate that the classical curriculum is essentially Catholic, particularly in light of the fact that educational traditions outside the Church have used similar curricular models and that so many other Catholic schools do not. So the curriculum is not necessarily Catholic itself, but instead provides a medium for the school to express its Catholicism across the entire school. Administrators I spoke to referenced this integrated nature as directly connected to the Catholic intellectual tradition, but neither parents nor teachers seemed to prioritize this connection.

Not only is the classical curriculum's connection to Catholicism debatable, but so is its status as "classical" at all. The classical schools model is based on an understanding of classical education that has its roots not directly in the pedagogical practices of Greece, Rome, and Medieval Europe, but rather in the *sui generis* ideas of Dorothy Sayers at Oxford in the 1940s (Sayers, 1947). Though she referenced the factual medieval educational structure of studying grammar, logic, and rhetoric, for medieval students, these were topics of study, while Sayers treated them more metaphorically, as stages of development (Leithart, 2008). Sayers' ideas became a powerful call to orient education away from developing specific skills and towards what might accurately be called a classical *goal* of liberal education: developing critical thinking, intellectual independence, and a desire for lifelong learning (Richard, 2023). These core goals, regardless of their authentically classical roots, took hold in the "classical education" movement, mostly among evangelical protestants and Great Books advocates like Mortimer Adler and E.D. Hirsch. Sacred Heart Academy does center these goals - liberal education over skill development - clearly in its vision statement (Appendix D), and so is "classical" insofar as those goals are the goals of a classical education, but much of the criticism of that label focuses on the non-central role of

Latin, and the inability of students to read great ancient and medieval works in the original language (Roberts, 2020). But regardless of its connection to true educational history, the term “classical curriculum” has clear meaning for the Sacred Heart community, and clear influence over its curricular decisions.

In the theory of practice, traditions give meaning to moral terms like “good,” and the classical curriculum bolsters the Catholic intellectual tradition insofar as it ascribes to the same definitions to these terms as the tradition does. Being a “good” Catholic, both for individuals and organizations, is a moral claim. Sacred Heart clearly believes that goodness is an objective criterion, so for community members whether a school is sufficiently “Catholic” (and in what ways) is an evaluable moral claim. Within the Catholic tradition, goodness is defined as alignment with internal purpose, *i.e.* the telos. So by their own moral tradition, Sacred Heart has a means to evaluate a “good” Catholic school, and therefore a means of achieving a coherent Catholic school identity, insofar as it lives up to its *purpose* as a Catholic school. That purpose, according to Catholic tradition and the school’s leaders, is to create beatitude (Maritain, 1943).

Anthropology and Practice

Beatitude is teachable, and is rooted in the anthropology of the human person (Groome, 1996). Because beatitude is both achievable and difficult, Catholic education has traditionally provided students the opportunity to flourish as well as the desire to do the difficult work to achieve it. Right desire is a component of virtue, which Sacred Heart frequently references in its mission statement and which appears in the remarks of both

teachers and administrators. Parents generally seemed to accede to the school's approach, but much more rarely understood the school's identity in terms of virtue. Rather, they were more likely to describe the school's education in terms of outcomes or achievement.

Academic or athletic achievement is not necessarily contrary to beatitude, but it is at best parallel, because its end goal is worldly. The extrinsic goals of academic achievement are often the procurement of greater academic credentials, which lead to better employment, which in turn leads to wealth and comfort; schools that prioritize these goals are not pursuing beatitude. Instead, the more humanistic curriculum of Sacred Heart prioritizes teaching students to "read well, speak well, and think well," an approach that seems to prioritize the intrinsic goods of academic achievement but deprioritizes skill development in areas such as science and math in favor of literature and history. Even these intrinsic goods are limited from a religious perspective. However, the school claims that its approach is particularly Catholic, not only because the literature and history the school teaches are presented from a Catholic perspective, but also because the goal of beatitude implies a particularly Catholic anthropology of the human person. Clear educational purposes and ends such as these distinguish teleological educational identities from more pragmatic approaches, such as prioritizing "college and career readiness".

In Christian thought, the Logos (*i.e.* Jesus Christ as the Word spoken by God in the Beginning) is both the cause and the reason for creation, and it provides the explanation for why humans - and only humans - are capable of understanding how and why the world functions the way it does. Sacred Heart teachers and administrators frequently referenced the Logos as the source of the school's approach to education. However, parents did not

mention the Logos as a reason they chose to join the Sacred Heart community, perhaps indicating a misalignment between the stated priorities of different stakeholders in the school community.

Parents did not tend to connect the school's identity directly to the traditions of the Church. Parent 2 was looking for "a convenient school for where we were going to buy a house" and then chose Sacred Heart because it "brings the warmth of community." Parent 3 chose Sacred Heart because it felt like a safer environment than her local public middle school would be. Parent 5 was connected to the school first because of a mutual friend, and appreciated its diversity, at least at first. Each of these parents subsequently referenced the school's Catholicity as something that matters *to the school*, but were less willing to claim that this Catholicity was of primary importance *to them as parents*. These differences signal a divergence between the ultimate priorities of the school and those of the parents that comprise much of the school community. But as Teacher 2 referenced, the school recognizes this distinction and understands it as an opportunity to teach not only the students, but families as well. By stating this goal, Teacher 2 indicates that the school considers its set of priorities to be more central to the identity of the school, and strives to induct not only students but parents into that vision.

This distinction between families' and the school's priorities is illustrated by each group's approach to student discipline. Administrators charged with promoting and protecting the school might be inclined to remove students from the school community quickly, and likely would in schools that understand themselves by institutional standards, but Sacred Heart's resistance to this act of "self-interest" points to their participation in

education rooted in the practice of an identity. Some parents, as well, expected more penalties for offending students, particularly when their child was the recipient of the offense. For example, in his discussion of discipline, the principal shared a situation where a first grader hit a classmate, and the parent of the child who was hit demanded that the offending student be expelled; instead, the principal refused and sought remediation. The school claims to rely on its connection to *Imago Dei* anthropology when making these decisions, choosing to elevate the dignity of each child, including those who break the expectations of the community.

The source of Catholic school identity must be the Catholic tradition, but that tradition can be translated into school identity in two ways: both as the root of the school's decision making and as the impetus for the school's practices. The more visible of the two is when Catholic identity manifests in practices, including via rituals, symbols, and curricula (Convey, 2012). These rituals and symbols are essential elements of building and maintaining Catholic identity, because they connect individuals with the divine and (in a religious context) with each other. The spiritual community uses rituals and symbols as reasons to come together; by collectively agreeing to pause each morning for prayer, or each Tuesday for Mass, the school becomes a Catholic community through shared experience. The individual adds meaning to the symbols and rituals by the authenticity of their devotion to them; not merely "going through the motions," but sincerely affirming belief. Likewise, teachers and administrators who use the sign of the cross to ready themselves for prayer or who genuflect before the Eucharist in the tabernacle are amplifying the meaning of these practices and therefore increasing their efficacy in drawing others into the community.

The practice that was most commonly cited by administrators, teachers, and parents as a source of Catholic identity was prayer. Because there was such agreement across all stakeholders in the school that prayer was important, it is a major source of identity under the definition that identity is strengthened by shared participation. But even within this broad agreement, different stakeholders held different beliefs about the nature of prayer. For example, Parent 2 sees prayer as “that whole process that reminds us just about the Crucifixion... reminding them what God expects them to do.” Parent 4 sees practices like Stations of the Cross as valuable ways to participate in a Catholic culture. And Parent 1 connected prayer to the act of “just being good people.” But the principal, former principal, and Teacher 1 all understood prayer not simply as an aspect of Catholic life, but as a connection to the divine in a way that is “metaphysically effective,” *i.e.* that prayer has been a major source of the school’s success through the intervention of Providence.

Beyond prayer, the school also cultivates its identity using symbols and rituals, including the visible symbol of a crucifix in each room of the school. This crucifix became a point of emphasis for the pastor, who accused other Catholic schools of being public schools with a crucifix. As I described above, the crucifix as a symbol focuses the community on Catholic goals, in that it marks the classroom as a Catholic space, but it also accomplishes this goal only insofar as it receives the authentic attention of individuals in the community. This comment seems to indicate that the pastor believes that in some Catholic schools, the symbol of the crucifix is not sufficient to create identity, because it is inert, neither focusing the community nor receiving authentic devotion. In contrast, he believes that Sacred Heart, through the same symbols and rituals, is able to construct a strong Catholic identity because the crucifix is able to connect a robust Catholic community with the meaning and

value given to it by the individual students, teachers, administrators, and parents in that community.

Community and Culture

A third source of identity beyond narrative connection to tradition and practices, symbols, and rituals is the construction of a functional school community. A “functional” community is one in which the values and priorities of stakeholders of the community are in alignment (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). In this case, alignment means that teachers can depend on support from parents, and parents can trust that the teachers will promote ideals that correspond to the families’ values. The clearest construction of moral community is the school’s stated priority that parents are the primary educators, a claim that was repeated and nearly universally supported, though I did find evidence that such support is not entirely universal: when parents and the school disagreed on the role of racial and cultural diversity (as reported by Parent 5), the response was often compromise and mutual coordination, but when parents and the school disagreed on the curriculum’s expression of Catholicism (as reported by the former principal during the school’s transition to the classical curriculum), affected parents left the school.

The school’s promotion of Catholic identity is the rubric by which both the school and the parents assess whether their values are aligned. Many of the families who join Sacred Heart are themselves Catholic, often participating in the Sacred Heart parish. Families who commute to the school, and families who move to join the school community, are demonstrating that they are seeking this particular community in contrast to others.

This self-selection indicates that community is both a source and consequence of school identity: the fact that the community is centered around a Catholic parish connects this school identity to Catholic identity. The key element here is choice; because Sacred Heart is a private school, families must opt in and therefore indicate by their selection that they are at least not opposed to the value structure of the school. The school also participates in an act of choice, due to the school being oversubscribed. The principal uses this choice as an opportunity to intentionally cultivate a school community that participates in the shared values of the school. I discuss below some of the consequences of these choices in terms of admission as a limited resource, but here the important factor is that school identity is strengthened by the fact that all stakeholders join the community intentionally.

A fourth and final source of school identity is shared school culture, in which stakeholders perceive a common mission or purpose to the school and participate in achieving that purpose collaboratively (Bryk, Lee & Holland, 1993). This shared purpose is related to the telos of beatitude above, but distinct in that it is an institutional purpose, rather than one rooted in tradition. Few stakeholders explicitly mentioned shared school culture as a priority, preferring to discuss either individual priorities (*e.g.* parents who seek academic achievement or student safety) or broader goals rooted in anthropology and tradition (*e.g.* administrators and teachers seeking connection to the Logos, and what is true, good, and beautiful). But explicit or not, stakeholders do reference school culture as they describe the school's interaction with these priorities. Both individual preferences and Catholic tradition strengthen the identity of the school, insofar as it is a Catholic school, but they exist at a level either above or below the school level. In contrast, Bryk noticed that though they are community oriented, Catholic schools are less a system than a "very

loose federation” in which “virtually all important decisions are made at individual school sites” (p. 299). This observation reinforces my claim that Sacred Heart understands itself as a Catholic school, but does not seem to participate in a broader sense of Catholic schooling as an identifiable practice.

Even so, the desire for shared school culture overlaps with other sources of identity - narrative, practice, and community - in ways that still reflect a strong identity. For example, there is a pedagogical commitment in the school to extremely limited technology use, which dovetails with families who prefer to minimize children’s technology use at home. This set of preferences is a cultural choice, overlapping with the shared values of a functional community in a way that builds school identity, although not necessarily Catholic school identity. Unlike the priorities for academic achievement and commitment to the Logos that I mentioned above, these are interactions and priorities that exist at school level, and therefore develop a unique school culture that then, indirectly, strengthens the school’s Catholic identity insofar as that culture is connected to the Catholic tradition.

The stated mission or purpose of the school is to create virtuous adults, as defined by the Catholic intellectual tradition. However, there is less clarity about the common purpose in other domains of the school. For example, the pastor claims that the school will have failed if students participate in shoplifting, indicating a negative definition of the purpose of the school as cultivation of moral values not to act wrongly. But the tether between this claim and the actions of the school is less clear than in the academic domain. The principal told of the parent of a child who had been hit by a peer, and that she had demanded the offending student be expelled. Such an approach would seek to ensure the

graduates of the school are virtuous by removing any students who might not already be so. In contrast, the principal argues that Catholic anthropology demands second chances and opportunities for reconciliation, and so he would be in favor of a developmental approach, in which students in trouble are taught and exhorted to improve. These perspectives clearly agree on the goal of having only virtuous students as graduates, but I was unable to determine if the differences in approach had ever led to tensions if and when a student resisted reconciliation.

The formation of a community of shared purpose is also developed by cultural participation, activities such as fundraisers, school plays, athletic teams, and mandatory volunteer hours. But these are sometimes sources of tension, perhaps indicating less universal agreement on the shared culture of the school community. Diversity was often cited as the source of these tensions: for example a lack of racial diversity on a key fundraising committee, language diversity as an impediment to volunteer hours, and a mismatch of values between the athletic program and the school's admission. The school intentionally elevated cultural practices, such as celebrating Our Lady of Guadalupe, but then also centered the curriculum around the values of "Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem." Again, I discuss diversity in more detail below, but its consequences are important to mention here as a context to the development of Catholic school identity through shared school culture.

Question 1 asked about stakeholders' perceptions of Sacred Heart's Catholic school identity, and I argue above that these perceptions translate into identity differently depending on the source of identity in question, either narrative, practice, community, or

culture. But given the definition of identity as what is central, distinct, and enduring about the school, most stakeholders believe that the source of Sacred Heart's identity is the classical curriculum, with its narrative, practice, community and culture as a consequence. By connecting the classical curriculum with Catholic foundational principles, the implication is that Catholic schools who do not use the classical curriculum are tapping into this Catholic intellectual tradition less effectively, and therefore that their Catholic school identity is weaker. This implication sets up a tension: if identity is strengthened by connection to other schools that share the same identity, then the uniqueness of the classical curriculum should weaken Sacred Heart's identity, but if identity is strengthened by connection to a tradition (from which other schools may have strayed), then the classical curriculum should strengthen it.

Research Question 2: How do their perceptions of identity affect, and how are they affected by, leaders' and educators' decisions?

As I described in my answer to Research Question 1 above, the Sacred Heart community extends its Catholic school identity across all of its stakeholders, including administrators, teachers, and parents. But though the parents contribute to the creation of Catholic school identity, they do so by choosing to participate in a school community that exists prior to their participation. The implication is that while parents choosing to participate or not helps to strengthen or weaken the school's Catholic identity, the responsibility for enacting the school's identity primarily falls to the principal and teachers, who are more permanent (Hobbie, Convey & Schuttloffel, 2010). Below, I use

organizational theory to describe the decision making process the principal and teachers use to construct and maintain the school's Catholic identity.

Intentional Community

First, I assess the causal claim that more Catholic teachers lead to a stronger Catholic identity. As I discussed above, Sacred Heart's Catholic identity derives from shared agreement across stakeholders about the school's common mission: that the school will be more authentically Catholic if more of its stakeholders subscribe to Catholic beliefs. Though some teachers I asked denied that being Catholic is a necessary precondition for being an excellent teacher at Sacred Heart, every teacher at the school *is* Catholic, and that correspondence across each teacher's personal religious framework clearly contributes to the identity of the school as a whole. This is in contrast to the families I interviewed, where two of the five families described themselves as not Catholic, a proportion that in my assessment reflects the religious demographics of the school population as a whole.

If identity construction is primarily the school's responsibility, one implication is that in any disagreement about priorities between teachers and parents, the teachers' priorities are considered more central to the moral community of the school. However, the school takes great pains to promote the idea that the parents are the primary educators of the children. While I saw no evidence that the school would counsel out families who vocally disagreed with the school's core principles (note the story about the student who expressed skepticism about the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception), the school does seem to reserve the right to continue to teach its principles over the objections of parents. I

argue, then, that the school's assertion that the school is secondary to the parents in the creation of the school's moral community may be true, but only given a certain level of prior agreement on core principles by the parents, which is itself a consequence of the school's ability to select families for admission.

The reciprocal relationship between the school and parents highlights a key claim of organizational theory, that a key consequence of strong organizational identity is legitimacy, defined as a collective opinion in the eyes of the public, or a certain subset of the public, that an organization is worthy of respect (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). While I did not interview parents of families who chose not to attend Sacred Heart, so I cannot make any claims about the legitimacy of the school in the eyes of the general public or of the residents of the local area more generally, the families that I did interview held the school in high esteem. This respect was high even among the families who did not describe themselves as Catholic, as they were attracted to the school according to its seriousness of purpose. Even Parent 5, who voiced concerns about diversity at the school, made clear that she held the school in high esteem, indicating a durability to the school's legitimacy despite challenges.

These families are choosing to participate in the Sacred Heart school community because they see the school's value choices as legitimate, *i.e.* worthy enough of respect to pay tuition to be a part of the school. But these families seemed to indicate different school values were of primary importance to them, with one parent specifically referencing the school's Catholic identity, but others focusing on safety, community, or academic excellence. In my answer to Question 1 above, I indicated that there was some overlap between these

values, but that they are distinct in important ways that undermine shared agreement on the school's core purpose.

The most important overlap between these different priorities is the consequence of the classical curriculum, which simultaneously communicates a Catholicity that attracts Parent 4, a seriousness of purpose that attracts Parent 2, and the academic focus on the humanities that attracts Parent 3. No parent directly referenced the curriculum's connection to the Logos or objective truth, beauty, and goodness, indicating that these ideas are more important to the administrators and teachers in the school than they are to parents. However, several parents did directly reference the classical curriculum as a source of distinction for the school, indicating that though the reasons for assenting may be somewhat at odds with those of the school, families are still granting legitimacy to the school's value choices.

Legitimacy

A key finding in organizational theory is that legitimacy is only loosely tied to "rational" assessments of the efficiency and effectiveness of organizations. Instead, legitimacy results from a correspondence between perception of the organization and stakeholders' prior expectations (Rowan & Miskel, 1999). So the strength of the school's legitimacy among parents and teachers results from meeting stakeholders' expectations. Legitimacy, then, becomes a function of identity communication, in which the school effectively communicates its core values in such a way that minimizes surprise or misalignment between the school and families who join the community.

One perception that was referenced by parents several times, and has therefore been intentionally or unintentionally communicated by the school, was an “extreme” nature of the school’s Catholic identity, *i.e.* the idea that Sacred Heart was “more” Catholic than some of its peer Catholic schools. Those parents who claimed this referenced the school’s prayer practices (such as stations of the cross). One parent also approvingly mentioned that there was no class taught specifically by a religion teacher, but rather that theological ideas were embedded across the curriculum. While the contention that these prayer practices cause the school to be “more” Catholic in some ways is debatable, and not the subject of this dissertation, the important takeaway is that parents perceived prayer practices as a source of identity, and granted the school legitimacy because their perceptions aligned with their experience.

It is notable that these parents’ expectations are not only of a general Catholicity that would apply to all Catholic schools, but stand in contrast to other Catholic schools, whether in degree or in kind. Though the Archdiocesan Official was quick to point out that Sacred Heart was one of several Catholic schools in the Archdiocese, and was therefore subject to all of the same standards and expectations as other schools, families clearly perceived the school as different from these other Catholic schools in a way that was meaningful to them, and the school lived up to these expectations in a way that generated legitimacy. I did not study other Catholic schools in the Archdiocese, so I cannot make claims to the veracity of these parents’ perceptions, but the respect the parents provide Sacred Heart, coupled with the stated expectations that Sacred Heart is distinct from other Catholic schools, indicates that parents’ perceptions of this distinction from other Catholic

schools is a key source of the school's legitimacy in the eyes of the parents in its own community.

This idea that Sacred Heart is building legitimacy as a consequence of its distinction is surprising given a key claim of organizational theory, which posits that organizations that desire legitimacy tend to imitate other schools in order to achieve it (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This process comes from the idea that stakeholders, particularly the public, have a preconceived idea of what the organization ought to be, and that preconception is formed by their experience with other forms of that organization, in this case, other Catholic schools. But in this case, Sacred Heart is building legitimacy not simply despite but because of its distinctions from other schools, indicating that the differences are not those that cause the stakeholders to question its school-ness. Indeed, other Catholic schools are now using Sacred Heart as a model, building their own classical curricula at schools nationwide. Perhaps, then, some Catholic schools have come to see Sacred Heart's model as a source of legitimacy, and that desire for legitimacy in their own schools is leading to a new isomorphic pressure? This question could and should be addressed by future research.

Renaissance Narrative as Policy Motivation

Of course, all schools desire to meet their own expectations; Sacred Heart is not unique in this pursuit. So the source of distinction must be rooted in either different goals, or in different institutional pressures that cause different levels of effectiveness in achieving the same goals. In the latter characterization, schools are more or less effective at reaching their goals because they sacrifice less or more of their identity in service of institutional

necessities, such as enrollment and tuition (Davies & Davies, 2009). This characterization of the distinction of Sacred Heart's identity correlates with the source of the school's narrative identity in its classical curriculum renaissance. According to this story, rather than sacrificing identity to serve institutional necessity, the school chose to prioritize identity, and the institutional necessities then flowed to the school as a consequence of this choice.

This story serves a significant explanatory role in the school's conception of itself, and it continues to drive decisions made by the principal and teachers. For instance, the pastor claimed that the principal's job was to maximize enrollment, which is a surprisingly institutional drive for a school that centers its Catholic identity so vocally. But the renaissance narrative causes the principal to prioritize identity in arenas such as admissions and discipline because he sees strong Catholic school identity and high enrollment as not in tension, but as mutually reinforcing. I discuss in my conclusions below how this perspective is simultaneously key for the reciprocal interaction between the identity of Sacred Heart and the decisions the principal makes in service of that identity, as well as the strength or weakness of the connection between Sacred Heart and other Catholic schools. It may be true that Sacred Heart has gained as an institution because of its prioritization of authentic Catholic identity, but that such a connection would be difficult to scale up to Catholic schooling in general.

The decision to transition to the classical curriculum was a major change, and according to organizational theory, major changes are often subject to significant resistance within organizations (Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton & Corley, 2013). The strength of this

resistance is often determined by whether the organization is tightly coupled or loosely coupled, *i.e.* whether the decisions of leadership are sufficient or insufficient to overcome the inertia of accumulated organizational routines. But other than the exit of some teachers and some families, the transition to the classical curriculum was not met with much resistance from stakeholders in the Sacred Heart community. This lack of resistance indicates a tight coupling of administrative decisions to enacted realities in the school, possibly through a collective realization that major change was necessary given the poor institutional health at the time. This realization then weakened the strength of organizational routines on individual decisions, and increased the relative effectiveness of leadership decisions, minimizing friction from the major change.

One explanation for the success of this change might be that it was an “idea whose time has come,” *i.e.* that it represents an alignment of problem, policy, and politics that leads to institutional change (Kingdon, 2003). In this model, policies exist first, waiting for a problem to solve; indeed, the classical curriculum was rooted in the ideas of Dorothy Sayers over six decades earlier, and had been successfully implemented in some (non-Catholic) schools since the early 1990s. Then, a problem arises that instigates the need for a policy, in this case, the imminent closure of Sacred Heart Parish School. And finally, a policy entrepreneur is necessary to personally shepherd the policy to fruition; the former principal served this role by advocating for the change and convincing the pastor to allow her to transition the school to a classical curriculum model. Kingdon’s policy streams model succinctly describes the normal inertia of isomorphic pressures, and explains the conditions necessary for significant change, conditions that were met at Sacred Heart in 2010.

In more recent years, the principal has been clear that decisions in the school are not made democratically, but rather by the authority of the principal. This emphasis indicates a tight coupling in the authority structure of the school, which could play a significant role in how quickly the school accepted and enacted the new curriculum and new emphasis on Catholic identity. According to organizational theory, tight coupling is in tension with organizational routines, which are generally resistant to changes in policy. But the former principal was able to retain teachers and families that had bought into the new approach, and was able to hire new teachers (such as Teacher 1) who joined because of this approach. The result was the development of new organizational routines that supported rather than resisted the classical curriculum and the focus on Catholic school identity.

This study has considered the development of Sacred Heart's Catholic identity as an illustrative example of tightly coupled leadership successfully overcoming institutional inertia to create strong identity in a school that did not prioritize its identity previously. However, it would be incorrect to then conclude that tight coupling is an essential component to identity construction. Instead, organizational theory argues that tight coupling is essential to institutional *change*, such as in the classical curriculum renaissance (Spillane, 2011). But given a hypothetical situation in which a school already participated in a strong Catholic identity, and then the principal decided to deprioritize this identity, the strength of the school's identity would stay strongest in given *loose* coupling between the principal's decisions and the organizational routines of teachers, which would in this case be elevating rather than diluting the school's identity.

The principal has two mechanisms subject to his authority to support both the identity of the school and its institutional health: official school policy and public communication. Policies such as decisions on hiring, admissions, and discipline contribute to the life of the school directly, and are rooted in identity insofar as the principal relies on that identity to make his decisions. Public communication is important to the creation of legitimacy because it helps set expectations, which the school meets or fails to meet, so the alignment between these two is essential for the maintenance of the school's institutional health.

And finally, the expectations, opinions, and routines of families and teachers in the community enact the school's policies. The strength of the school's legitimacy among its stakeholders, and the tight coupling of the principal's decisions, indicates that the organizational routines in the school community are not in tension with the school's identity, but in alignment with it. This alignment indicates that the school community is set up in such a way that future changes away from strong Catholic identity might be met with resistance, rather than the other way around.

Research Question 3: What challenges does Sacred Heart encounter in maintaining its Catholic school identity?

Above, I defined organizational identity in five ways: as what an organization *is* as contrasted to what it is *not*; as what is central, distinct, and enduring about the organization; as the result of an organizational narrative connected to tradition; as both the cause and consequence of a functional community; and as the product of a culture

surrounding a common purpose. I also contrasted the identity of a school against institutional necessities, such as money or prestige, which are all morally neutral but necessary for the organization to survive. Note that these institutional goals are universally necessary, so they cannot define what an organization is and is not. They also cannot serve as a source of authentic distinction, and are rarely central to an organization. In the organizations that do place money and legitimacy as central, the narrative story of the organization is one of acquiring, and is therefore pragmatic and unconnected to any moral tradition. And neither functional communities nor common cultures can be built around the pursuit of institutional survival.

Internal and External Goods

In the theory of practice, institutional necessities are identified as “external” goods that exist independent of the practice and can be extrapolated to other institutions, rather than “internal” goods that are particular to a specific action and to specific organizations that center themselves around performing that action well. Performing actions “well” requires a common standard of evaluation, one that MacIntyre argues is constructed within communities of organizations that perform these actions. And so the pursuit of excellence, as defined by these communities of “practice” is also the pursuit of internal goods that are inaccessible to others who do not pursue such excellence. In this way, practices draw individuals out of disparate moral frameworks towards internal goods (MacIntyre, 1981). Thus, the pursuit of external goods cannot be the source of identity, while the pursuit of

internal goods is exactly the source of identity, for any organization, including schools, and including Sacred Heart.

For many organizations, the challenge in building organizational identity derives from a tension between choosing to prioritize internal goods in order to promote identity, against choosing to prioritize external goods in order to ensure survival. For some organizations, these goals are not in tension, as excellent practice pursued for its own sake often creates popularity, wealth, and prestige as secondary consequences. However, many Catholic schools have felt a tension between identity and survival, believing that the pursuit of Catholic identity discourages families from applying, and that the most effective sources of legitimacy - and therefore tuition - are at best parallel to the internal purposes of Catholic schools (Fitzpatrick, 2019; Belmonte & Cranston, 2009; Boyle, Haller & Hunt, 2016).

Perhaps the most important finding of this research has been that Sacred Heart, by choosing to lean into its Catholic school identity, has actually benefited in its pursuit of external goods. This win/win connection between pursuit of internal and external goods flows directly from the school's renaissance narrative, which claims that the school is now successful because it transitioned from a conventional Catholic school to a classical curriculum. Further, this narrative connects both to the Catholic intellectual tradition, because of the emphasis on Christian anthropology and epistemology in the classical curriculum, and to the school's practice, because the principal uses the tenets of the Catholic faith to guide his decision making regarding hiring, admissions, and discipline.

This is not to say that Sacred Heart never has to decide between centering its mission and pursuing legitimacy or tuition, only that for this particular school, a focus on

strengthening the school's Catholic identity has correlated with an increase in external success. This is also not to say that Sacred Heart's decisions could or should be replicated by other Catholic schools looking to experience a similar resolution of the dilemma between identity and survival, as the school is the product of its particular history, context, location, demographics, and staff, none of which may be replicable. Although the popularity of the school in national Catholic education circles indicates that some other schools do see Sacred Heart as a source of inspiration.

Catholic Schools or Catholic Schooling

The experience of Sacred Heart does raise an important question about the transferability of its model of Catholic school identity. In particular, is the identity of Sacred Heart the identity of a Catholic *school*, which is contextual, particular, and directly connected to its individual history and place, or is it the *practice* of Catholic *schooling* or Catholic *education* writ large, which is a broader, more abstract concept that might be more easily transferred to other schools? I argue that Sacred Heart's success is evidence of the former, though it necessarily does contain elements that connect to the Catholic intellectual tradition and are therefore broadly applicable to Catholic schools.

After its transition to the classical curriculum, Sacred Heart seems to have attracted a particular subset of teachers and families who desired a school with a deep commitment to Catholic school identity, or at least to a religious identity with a deep seriousness of purpose. In the articles I cited above (Fitzpatrick, 2019; Belmonte & Cranston, 2009; Boyle, Haller & Hunt, 2016), principals and schools make decisions that prioritize academic

excellence over Catholic identity, largely because the families at those schools claim this as their primary desire from a private school. But for Sacred Heart, families and teachers often move from out of the area to join the community, indicating that the local community itself was not the sole source of the energy that is currently supporting the school. So the Sacred Heart community might not be tapping into a latent desire available to all Catholic schools, but might instead be attracting a small subset of Catholic school interested families and teachers previously dispersed over a large geographic area.

If Sacred Heart's success was an indication of the strength of Catholic schooling in an abstract sense, then its community of families would seek out the school for the purposes of its Catholic identity. This relationship would be at least somewhat independent of these families' Catholicity themselves, but rather would be an indication of the attractiveness of the values and priorities of Catholic schooling. But several of the parents indicated that they participated in "school shopping," in which they considered which schools were the best fit for their families, and often considering factors parallel to Catholic identity, most notably academic achievement, in their decisions. The school, in turn, seeks a match as well through the principal's mediated admissions process that includes interviews with the families seeking the reasons they want to join the Sacred Heart community. Though this process does dilute these families' connection to Catholic identity as an abstract concept, it strengthens their connection to Sacred Heart as a particular Catholic school, since the family chooses this school on purpose as the consequence of an alignment between the family's values and the school's. This alignment is clearly related to a more abstract conception of Catholic identity, but it is also clearly particularized to an interaction between

one family and one school, indicating a consequential particularity in the Catholic identity of Sacred Heart.

One major efficiency the principal referenced as relieving a tension between identity and external goods was the ability to rely on word of mouth marketing. Other schools, in pursuit of enrollment, often have to spend scarce resources, including money and time, on recruiting and advertising. Because Sacred Heart has built a functional community that vocally communicates its identity to itself and to others with similar values, the school does not need to use its resources on recruiting, instead letting interested families and teachers come to it. The result is another example of a tension that other schools might have to resolve that Sacred Heart doesn't, leading to another self-perpetuating consequence of strong identity that might not be easily transferable to other schools.

Though Sacred Heart clearly benefits from its increased enrollment and reduced pressure to pursue external goods, these successes have also exacerbated some other problems for the school. Most commonly referenced by teachers and the principal was expanding to a "double track," which puts pressure on the physical space of the school, necessitates hiring an additional teacher every year, and reduces the consistency of the experience of students in the school. Although the school adopted the double track to more fully serve the community of interested families, splitting a single grade into two classes may dilute identity because the classroom is a major source of community for students, so students in one class might not feel close connections to their peers in the other class. This situation and resulting policy decisions demonstrate that even with its popularity, Sacred Heart is not immune to dilemmas between the pursuit of internal and external goods.

This is not to say that Catholic identity must be unitary or even orthodox to count as Catholic. Some practices and formal aspects of the school, such as Mass, are obviously Catholic, and participating in those aspects is essential for a common notion of Catholic schooling. But as stakeholders participate in less formal aspects of the Catholic school, the connection between these practices and beliefs and Catholic identity becomes less clear. For instance, the classical curriculum is clearly central to Sacred Heart's *school* identity, but its uniquely *Catholic* nature is less obvious. Nevertheless, so long as the stakeholders in the school are participating in a common aspect of school life (and therefore by its commonality, strengthening school identity), and so long as these aspects are reasonably derivative of Catholic tradition, they can still serve as key components to a strengthening of the identity of a Catholic school, even if not Catholic schooling in general.

Thresholds of Diversity

One such dilemma results from two conflicting aspects of the creation of Catholic school identity. The first is that identity is certainly strengthened by the agreement of stakeholders about core moral principles, and that agreement is far more likely if stakeholders share common beliefs about the nature of the world, *i.e.* if stakeholders are Catholic. But the second is that the Catholic faith is both rooted in the *Imago Dei*, which sees all humans as infinitely and equally valuable, and demands evangelism, which is the proclaiming of the Gospel to non-Catholics who are willing to hear it. The competing claims indicate that inclusivity of non-Catholic stakeholders may undermine Catholic school identity, but in some ways is required by an authentic Catholic school identity.

Sacred Heart responds to this dilemma in several ways that attempt to uphold both sides. First, the school community, including administrators and teachers but also including parents like Parent 4, believes that the Catholic identity of the school is strong enough to absorb non-Catholic members. Indeed, some religious diversity might be good for the strength of Catholic identity, because non-Catholic members might remind Catholic students and teachers not to take Catholic assumptions (such as the Immaculate Conception) for granted, and learn to defend these ideas more vigorously in preparation for interaction with the broader public. But there must be some threshold of religious diversity beyond which this effect begins to undermine Catholic identity, turning the school from a Catholic culture able to tend to the needs of others, to a non-Catholic culture that happens to attend classes with a crucifix on the wall.

To address this threshold issue, Sacred Heart seems to admit non-Catholic students and families, but remains steadfast in its recruitment of an all-Catholic faculty. Because teachers are primarily in charge of communicating identity to their students, the school places particular emphasis on hiring teachers who are not only Catholic but who are willing and able to communicate their faith in a way that reinforces the school's Catholic identity. There is an assumption that more Catholic teachers lead to a stronger Catholic identity for the school, one for which Sacred Heart's experience provides good evidence. But as a consequence of the school's emphasis on *religious* diversity, the school must also wrestle with concerns regarding *racial* diversity.

The Church is a global institution; membership in the Catholic community is entirely determined by participation in the sacraments and belief in core Catholic doctrine, and is

therefore completely unrelated to race, nationality, or ethnicity. However, Catholic *schools*, particularly in the United States, tend to have whiter, wealthier students and families, perhaps because these schools are private and require tuition to attend. Sacred Heart is a school with a mixed record on racial diversity, in which the student population is fairly diverse (and was labeled as such, at least in the recent past, by Parent 2 and Parent 5, both of whom are black), but the teacher population is almost exclusively white. Furthermore, though the school hosts some diversity among its student population, it does not match the demographics of the surrounding population, which causes it to stand out as whiter than neighboring elementary school.

I discuss diversity here as a challenge to the school's Catholic identity because the school's administration clearly sees increasing the diversity of the school as a priority, but one that is perhaps in tension with other key priorities. One such priority is to center the "Catholic story," which according to the principal derives primarily from the cities of Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem. The implication here is that because the Church's history comes from Europe, Catholic ideas are European ideas, and so a Eurocentric lens is necessary for an authentically Catholic understanding of history. Though such a claim might strike modern readers as unnecessarily exclusive, the Catholic tradition is necessarily connected to the institution of the Church, meaning that its history is geographically and temporally bound, but it is also cognizant of the universality of its mission, and that (particularly in the current context of global migrations) the Church is a truly global, multicultural institution.

One key mechanism by which schools such as Sacred Heart can ensure students and families can feel included is to encourage choice; if families choose to join the Sacred Heart community, they are choosing it because the school matches their values in some way, which contributes significantly to feeling included. But the families who were vocal about their concerns with diversity, particularly Parent 5, described themselves as less likely to choose to participate in the community if the community remained below a certain threshold of diversity (such as when the volunteers for the fundraising committee were all white) or when the curriculum was presented in problematic ways (such as regarding the African masks and dance).

One way to address the concerns of Parent 2 and Parent 5 might be to include more diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) priorities and policies at the school, not as supplements to but as manifestations of its religious commitments. Parent 5 in particular referenced DEI as what she believed was a need at the school, and indicated that she had contacts with DEI specialists who were also Catholic. Her perspective is significant in that it recognizes that the two approaches are indeed two value systems that, while not necessarily in conflict, can complicate everyday decisions and therefore might be in tension at some points. For instance, given that the principal desires both an entirely Catholic faculty and a faculty that includes diverse racial representation, what policy should the principal pursue if it happens to be that all of the Catholic teachers who apply for a certain job are white? Which of the two goals is of higher priority?

So far, based on the composition of the faculty, the principal has chosen Catholic identity over racial diversity in the instances where those two are in tension. But the

evidence I have collected about the workings of the school indicates that he, and the school in general, seek to find mutually beneficial solutions that satisfy the needs of both Catholic school identity and other important priorities. In this case, future efforts might be made to take advantage of the Church's worldwide presence, and include Catholic faculty from nonwhite or immigrant communities. What results is evidence that at Sacred Heart, as in the broader literature, the decisions of the principal are essential for the consistent choices that determine a school's Catholic identity.

Conclusions

In the findings I presented in the previous chapter, and in the answers to the research questions I provided above, I described the Catholic school identity of Sacred Heart, the policies and decisions that fostered and maintained that identity, and the challenges the school faces when accomplishing these goals. Across these answers, several themes emerged that clarify the concept of Catholic school identity. The first theme was the role of the classical curriculum in the construction of Sacred Heart's Catholic school identity. The second theme was the happy coincidence of Sacred Heart's pursuit of strong identity and its accumulation of external goods, such as wealth and legitimacy. And the third theme was the particularity of the context within which Sacred Heart built its identity, which interacts with its specific challenges to complicate the school's connections with Catholic schooling as a more general concept.

Note that this study was a qualitative interview study, and so was not capable of drawing generalized conclusions about other schools, nor of providing policy advice, either

to Sacred Heart or to other schools. So the conclusion that Sacred Heart's identity was primarily strengthened by its use of the classical curriculum should not be interpreted as a forward-facing claim that other Catholic schools who wish to strengthen their own identities should also transition to the classical curriculum. This study serves to complexify the relationship between Catholic identity and institutional health rather than contradict the extant claim that tensions exist between these two priorities and should not be interpreted as a general lack of tension between these priorities. And the claim that Sacred Heart's identity is evidence of the location of identity in individual schools rather than in a broader construct should not be interpreted as a claim that Sacred Heart is in competition with Church directives for Catholic school identity. Instead, I provide explanation and evidence for the claims I am making below, with an expectation that the contributions this study provides to the theory of Catholic school identity can help motivate and inform future research, particularly future quantitative research that can assess these themes' application at other schools, and in other contexts.

The Classical Curriculum

Based on the consensus of administrators, teachers, and parents I spoke to in this study, my first conclusion is that the primary factor that strengthens Sacred Heart's Catholic school identity is its use of a classical curriculum. I make this claim because the classical curriculum was consistently named by multiple stakeholders as an aspect of the school that is both central and distinct, making it satisfy the definition of strong organizational identity. And because the school intentionally and repeatedly ties the classical curriculum to the

Logos, *Imago Dei*, and other anthropological components of Catholic identity, the classical curriculum is not only a source of school identity, but of Catholic school identity. Other sources of identity matter to Sacred Heart, such as its admissions policies and all-Catholic faculty, but these factors hold far less relevance for administrators', teachers', and parents' conceptions of the school's Catholic identity.

As I discussed above, the classical curriculum is not necessarily "classical" in the sense that it directly imitates the pedagogical decisions of medieval education, but this language does clearly have meaning to the stakeholders at Sacred Heart. Narratives are an important aspect of any organizational identity (MacIntyre, 1981), and Sacred Heart uses this language of "classical" as a narrative tool to communicate a seriousness of purpose, to connect to other schools attempting to implement a similar curricular model, and to differentiate the curriculum from those of other, more conventional public and Catholic schools. Indeed, teachers at Sacred Heart shared about spreading their ideas about curriculum to other teachers and administrators in other schools, with a sense of growing the community not of Catholic education, but of classical Catholic education. In this sense, the language of "classical curriculum" is both central and distinct for Sacred Heart's Catholic school identity.

Not only is the classical curriculum a major source of Sacred Heart's Catholic school identity, but so is the story the school tells itself about itself and about the successful transition to this new curricular model. Because a previous push into the unknown was successful, the renaissance story provides the school a consistent institutional memory that gives comfort and courage to administrators and teachers who are deciding how fully to

trust the classical curriculum and push for strong Catholic identity. Institutional change requires an alignment of problem, policy, and politics; stories such as that of Sacred Heart provide a ready policy for schools experiencing similar problems as they were in 2010, and likely inspire confidence in other schools' principals enough that they as well serve as policy entrepreneurs seeking institutional change (Kingdon, 2003). Such confidence depends on the renaissance narrative, and other schools who wish to strengthen their Catholic identity might not have the same success as Sacred Heart if not coupled with the underlying institutional narrative.

Future researchers can use this finding to assess the potential connection between the classical curriculum and Catholic school identity over a broader population. They might, for example, take advantage of the growing classical school movement and ask a representative sample of Catholic classical schools about the reasons they use the classical curriculum, and potentially connect the classical curriculum to identity through the Catholic intellectual tradition. Researchers could ask similar questions to more conventional Catholic schools and to non-Catholic classical schools to assess whether the classical curriculum is connected to these schools' identities as well. Though I am confident in the conclusion that the classical curriculum is a primary source of Sacred Heart's Catholic school identity, only after this additional research can the field confidently argue whether schools would strengthen their Catholic identity or not if they followed Sacred Heart's decision.

Identity and Institutional Health

The second conclusion I can draw from the evidence I reported above is that Sacred Heart has used its strengthened identity to grow the school. The school's renaissance narrative gives it a sense of self as a Catholic school that both derives directly from the establishment of the classical curriculum and provides justification for the school's increased legitimacy. It is this legitimacy that in turn has allowed for other factors and policies that have strengthened the school's identity downstream, such as a wide draw of families interested in Sacred Heart and the ability to intentionally select the student body through admissions. So a stronger Catholic identity and stronger institutional health have not been in tension at Sacred Heart; indeed, a risky decision to prioritize identity seems to have *caused* the school's increase in legitimacy and wealth.

The key takeaway that Sacred Heart extracts from its renaissance story is that internal and external goods are not necessarily in tension. That is, a pursuit of the internal goods of Catholic identity also produced a major windfall of external goods in the form of high enrollment, tuition, and legitimacy. Families perceive the school as authentic, and consequently are attracted to the school to participate in that authenticity, even if the school's administrators and teachers have a clearer idea of what about the school makes it authentically Catholic. This experience contrasts with the literature, in which principals and teachers often believe that identity and institutional survival are at least parallel, if not directly in tension. And note that authenticity is difficult for an organization to create, and impossible to create quickly; other schools cannot "decide" to adopt authenticity as a means to sell themselves.

Future researchers can assess this connection more broadly, and will likely find a deeply complex relationship that depends on context and scale. Would other individual schools find success by relying heavily on their identity to draw in families looking for a school committed to their identity? Or is Sacred Heart's success a product of idiosyncratic forces, unusually competent leadership, and Providence? Further, and with particular attention to Sacred Heart's attraction of families from across the country, is there a saturation point beyond which the demand for schools with strong Catholic identity begins to wane?

Catholic Schools and Catholic Schooling

The final conclusion I can draw is the claim that Sacred Heart's identity is strengthened at the expense of the identity of Catholic schooling as a more general concept. I have explained several times throughout this dissertation that Catholic school identity is formed by the connection between an individual school and the broader Catholic intellectual tradition, through beliefs and conceptions of the human person, through practices, rituals, and prayers, and through communities formed with a common, Catholic purpose. But if the classical curriculum is what is central and distinct about Sacred Heart, and it is distinct *from other Catholic schools*, then the classical curriculum is identifying Sacred Heart as Catholic in contrast to other schools, who are “less” so. Importantly, this claim is not contrasting Sacred Heart's identity against that of any one particular school, but rather is contrasting the identity of an individual Catholic school against the broader concept of Catholic schooling. While other Catholic schools can and do share core values

with Sacred Heart, the priority for the classical curriculum locates Catholic identity in the school rather than in the category of Catholic education.

Further, the challenges Sacred Heart faces as it pursues its Catholic identity are both particular to the school and a consequence of its connection to the broader Catholic tradition. For example, both the pastor and several parents clearly stated that they wish Sacred Heart was more diverse, and that they believed that increasing the diversity of the school was in accordance with a strong Catholic identity. However, diversity is a challenge for many Catholic schools that may be rooted in the Eurocentrism of the Catholic story, and in the lack of diversity among applicants to teach in schools with a strong Catholic identity.

Some schools who pursue a strong Catholic identity will respond to these challenges in one way, while others will respond differently, even while both might cite their respective schools' identity as the motivation for their decisions. These disparate reactions to challenges present an opportunity to further study the boundaries of Catholic school identity and the connections or distinctions between schools that claim it. Future research should identify a particular challenge, such as increasing diversity, that could be interpreted two ways within the aegis of Catholic school identity, and should assess how different schools respond to this particular challenge. Then, research could identify the boundaries of Catholic school identity implied by each school's policies. The resulting analysis could provide valuable insight to the robustness of Catholic school identity as an abstract concept, or its existence as a contextual concept that applies individually to particular schools. I believe this study has provided evidence for the latter, at least in the identity of Sacred Heart.

Future research can and should investigate these three themes. Sacred Heart saw success with its transition to the classical curriculum; other schools' experience with the same transition could clarify how, exactly, classical and Catholic are related. Sacred Heart doesn't seem to have to choose between strong identity and institutional health, while other schools do; using this study as motivation to investigate other schools who choose strong identity could help inform future policy. Sacred Heart's identity, and the challenges it faces, highlights a uniqueness that could potentially undermine a broader conception of Catholic schooling; investigating whether these challenges are shared across schools could lead to a more robust theory of identity construction in Catholic schools. I believe that this study has provided the qualitative context to motivate and inform these future studies, and has therefore provided significant contributions to the literature on Catholic school identity.

Appendix A: Positionality Statement

As a researcher, I recognize that my interests and perspectives are shaped by my lived experiences. In my research, I will be studying Catholic school identity, a phenomenon that intersects with my experience in at least two major ways. First, I am myself a practicing Catholic, and so I believe that the principles Catholic schools claim to teach are true. Second, I am a teacher in a Catholic school, so I am broadly invested in the success of Catholic education in general. These aspects of my identity could benefit my research by attuning me to faith-centered claims, but they may also impact my ability to assess these claims fairly, such as if I were to require less evidence than other researchers might to label such a claim as well grounded.

These lived experiences help form my positionality with regard to this research, and I recognize their ability to create both perceptions of researcher bias and actual researcher bias. I pledge to approach this research from as objective of a perspective as possible, and I will take tangible steps, such as member checking interview responses to ensure authenticity to their intended meaning, involving my advisor in the coding process to ensure accuracy and impartiality, including members of my dissertation committee that do not share these lived experiences, to address the effects of my positionality.

However, I also believe that my desire for both Catholicism and Catholic schools to succeed leads me not to a position of passive acceptance of these institutions' claims, but rather a heightened attention to them, and a necessary background knowledge that gives me the unique ability to assess whether the claims are valid. Catholic schools face choices

and dilemmas in the face of competing imperatives; a Catholic school teacher such as myself might be more capable of understanding those demands, and therefore might be better able to collect data in an authentic voice, from the actual perspective of those in the Catholic schools.

In this way, mitigation of the potential of bias is a real and important aspect of my research program, but so is the elevation of the consequences of my own emic perspective. Such a perspective can help me identify themes in language external researchers might not understand, or it could help me gain access to teachers and parents with valuable perspectives to share. Unquestionably, my internal connection to the school added to the trust subjects granted me, not a trust that I would unfairly refrain from criticism of the school, but rather a trust that my understanding of the school would be authentic enough to reflect the subjects' own lived experience, and therefore that any criticism of the school would be warranted and legitimate.

It is from this position, both its strengths and weaknesses, that I seek to better understand the phenomenon of Catholic school identity and how it manifests in Catholic schools.

Appendix B: Consent Form

Project Title	<i>Catholic School Identity in Practice</i>
Purpose of the Study	<i>This research is being conducted by Christopher Hurst at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you are connected to Catholic education and Sacred Heart Academy. The purpose of this research project is to understand Catholic school identity and how this identity is created, maintained, and communicated at Sacred Heart.</i>
Procedures	<i>The procedures involve personal interviews. The researcher will request to meet at a time that is acceptable to both schedules, and either at a place of your choosing, or virtually on Zoom. The researcher will request to record the interview, but you may request to turn off the recording at any time. If you consent, in-person interviews will be audio recorded, and virtual interviews will be video recorded. You may still participate without providing consent to record. Interview questions will ask about your perceptions of Catholic school identity. Interviews will last roughly one hour.</i>
Potential Risks and Discomforts	<i>There is a risk of breach of confidentiality if you participate in this study. Efforts to mitigate this risk are described in the confidentiality section.</i>
Potential Benefits	<i>There are no direct benefits from participation in this research. However, possible benefits include more informed policy regarding the identity of Catholic schools in general and Sacred Heart Academy in specific. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of Catholic school identity.</i>
Confidentiality	<i>Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by storing recording data on a password protected computer, and written notes in a locked filing cabinet. If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your name and the name of the school will be anonymous, but your real title will be used. Your decision to participate or not to participate will have no impact on your employability. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law. Only the researcher will have access to the recorded data, and all data will be destroyed upon completion of the project, approximately August 2024.</i>

<p>Right to Withdraw and Questions</p>	<p><i>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</i></p> <p><i>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator:</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Christopher Hurst 2226 Benjamin Building, College Park, MD 20742 churst@umd.edu (240) 764-2200</p>	
<p>Participant Rights</p>	<p><i>If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">University of Maryland College Park Institutional Review Board Office 1204 Marie Mount Hall College Park, Maryland, 20742 E-mail: irb@umd.edu Telephone: 301-405-0678</p> <p><i>This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects. For more information regarding participant rights, please visit: https://research.umd.edu/research-resources/research-compliance/institutional-review-board-irb/research-participants</i></p>	
<p>Statement of Consent</p>	<p><i>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.</i></p> <p><i>If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</i></p>	
<p>Signature and Date</p>	<p>NAME OF PARTICIPANT [Please Print]</p>	
	<p>SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT</p>	
	<p>DATE</p>	

Appendix C: Recruitment Letter

Dear Mr./Mrs. Stakeholder:

My name is Christopher Hurst, and I am a graduate student and a researcher studying Sacred Heart Academy. I am also a teacher at nearby [Local] Catholic High School. I am interested in studying Catholic school identity, particularly how the Sacred Heart community understands what Catholic school identity is, and how the school builds its identity.

I am reaching out to you because I am interested in hearing your perspective. Would you be willing to meet with me to share your thoughts on Sacred Heart, and on its Catholic identity?

If you are interested in meeting with me, I would be happy to set up a meeting at a time and place that makes the most sense for your schedule. I'm happy to meet you at Sacred Heart, or if you prefer, we can meet virtually. Please just let me know when and where works best, and I will do everything I can to make that happen. I expect these interviews to last roughly one hour, and I understand that this is asking for a lot of your time. I am grateful for the time you are willing to share with me!

Please note that I will ask to record our interview - audio recording if we meet in person, video if we meet virtually. But you can still participate even if you would like me not to record.

Thank you for your interest in this project. I am fascinated by Catholic schools and by how they see themselves as Catholic, and I am convinced that your perspective will help me understand these ideas better. If we agree to an interview please look for more details, including a required consent form, as we get closer to our meeting.

Sincerely,

Christopher Hurst
University of Maryland - College Park
[Local] Catholic High School
PhD Candidate in Education Policy

Appendix D: Sacred Heart Vision Statement

Sacred Heart Academy educates children in the truest and fullest sense by giving them the necessary tools of learning and by fostering wonder and love for all that is genuinely true, good, and beautiful. We emphasize classical learning because we want our students to read well, speak well, and think well and ultimately because truth and beauty are good in themselves and desirable for their own sake. We seek to incorporate our students into the wisdom of two thousand years of Catholic thought, history, culture, and arts so that they might understand themselves and their world in the light of the truth and acquire the character to live happy and integrated lives in the service of God and others. Education in this deep and comprehensive sense extends beyond the classroom and is more than just the acquisition of skills. It encompasses the whole of one's life. For this reason, Sacred Heart seeks to involve families ever more deeply in the life of the school and in the education of their children.

True education has always rested on two presuppositions. The first is that truth is desirable for its own sake. It is good not for what it does, but for what it is. The second is that knowledge consists not in bending the truth to ourselves, but in conforming ourselves to truth. We can only conform ourselves to truth by freely embracing and loving it, and we can only love truth if we are enticed by its beauty. Love of beauty has therefore always been integral to the discovery of truth and true education has always sought to form the heart and mind, reason and will, desire and knowledge. In short, education forms the whole person in light of truth, beauty, and goodness.

The Vision Statement seeks to root a comprehensive understanding of education in a compelling and beautiful vision of reality worthy of students' love. This vision is intended to govern every facet of the school's life. Its aim is twofold: first, to communicate a certain body of knowledge; and second, to cultivate a certain kind of person, to develop as far as possible what is uniquely human in him, and so to equip him with the skills, habits, and aptitudes necessary to embrace truth and to become the person he was truly created to be. Immediately it becomes clear that no aspect of a school's life is truly 'extra-curricular' or falls outside of its core mission of education, because every aspect of its life—from the way the school prays, to the dress code of students and staff, the arrangement of furniture in the classroom, the paint and posters on the wall, the activities during recess, the way technology is used, and the songs the children sing—reflects the school's judgments and priorities about the meaning of its educational mission. Everything a school does teaches something. Everything a school does is education of some sort. The important thing is to be sure that it is good and coherent education and that policies, procedures, pedagogical methods, and the culture of the school are not at cross purposes with the vision.

Curriculum, pedagogical methods, and all the details of the school's life should therefore be constantly assessed both in light of the conviction that knowledge and love of truth, beauty, and goodness are ends in themselves and in light of the twofold goal of the Vision Statement. Every activity, program, policy, method, or proposal should be tested by the following criteria, which follow from this vision, though not all are equally applicable to each of these facets of the school's life.

Appendix E: Schedule of Interviews

10/2/23	Pilot interview with principal of [local Catholic high school]
10/4/23	Interview #1 with Principal
10/6/23	Interview #2 with Parent #1
10/9/23	Interview #3 with Archdiocesan Official
10/11/23	Interview #4 with Pastor
10/13/23	Interview #5 with Teacher #1
10/18/23	Interview #6 with Former Principal
10/20/23	Interview #7 with Parent #2
10/23/23	Interview #8 with Parent #3
10/27/23	Interview #9 with Teacher #2
10/30/23	Interview #10 with Teacher #3
11/1/23	Interview #11 with Teacher #4
11/2/23	Interview #12 with Parent #4
11/5/23	Interview #13 with Parent #5

Appendix F-1: Interview #1 Protocol

First, thank you Mr. Principal for sitting down with me today.

Before I begin, let me ask: how long have you been principal at Sacred Heart?

What was your pathway to becoming principal?

What is your favorite part of the role of principal?

What part of the role do you find most challenging?

One way to understand the identity of a school is through decisions. When a hard decision comes up, in order to make that decision, schools often have to ask themselves, “who are we?” Can you describe a time where you faced a decision like this?

When you made that decision, what was it about Sacred Heart that informed your choice?

Another way to understand the identity of a school is as a story. What kinds of stories do people tell about Sacred Heart?

What would you say is the story of Sacred Heart as understood by people outside the Sacred Heart community?

Administrative decisions often involve curriculum, and Sacred Heart is known for its classical curriculum. Which aspects of this curriculum do you believe are most central to who Sacred Heart is as a school?

One potential criticism people have made of the classical curriculum is that it prioritizes Western ideas at the expense of a more global perspective. What would you say to someone who makes this observation?

The Sacred Heart vision statement asks “is excellence the highest standard, or is excellence subordinate to lower standards such as convenience, popularity, or marketing considerations?” What kinds of decisions have you made that require a choice between excellence and these lower standards?

How does Sacred Heart market itself to students and families?

Are there any aspects about Sacred Heart that you would like to change, but can’t because of how students and families would react?

Are there any aspects about Sacred Heart that you would like to change, but can’t because of state regulation?

Are there any aspects about Sacred Heart that you would like to change, but can’t because of how teachers would react?

At Sacred Heart, what does it mean for a teacher to be an excellent teacher?

Some administrative decisions might affect teachers’ patterns and routines. If you were making a decision like that, how would you convince a teacher to make a difficult change?

I define Catholic school identity as a shared sense of purpose that is central, distinct, and enduring because it connects particular Catholic beliefs to the practices of a Catholic school.

Are there particular ways that you enact Catholic identity at Sacred Heart?

Could you please share with me the names of a few parents and a few teachers that you believe would offer a helpful perspective on the Catholic identity of Sacred Heart?

I'm also interested in reaching out to Mrs. Former Principal, to ask her about her perspective on the transition to the classical curriculum. Could you please help me contact her?

Thank you again for sitting down with me and sharing your perspective!

Appendix F-2: Interview #2 Protocol

First, thank you Mrs. Parent for sitting down with me today.

Before we begin, let me ask you: how did you come to [your role in the school]?

What are your responsibilities as [this role]?

Could you describe a situation where the school leadership would make a different decision because of the inputs of parents and organizations like [yours]?

Imagine, if you will, that Sacred Heart was provided a grant giving it essentially unlimited financial resources. How do you think that grant would change the school?

One of the main purposes of the parent volunteer corps is to serve the school. But continuing to imagine if the school had infinite resources: how would that impact the purpose of the [organization]?

I'd like to ask you a bit about your perspective not just as [your role] but also as a parent of students in the school. Why did your family choose Sacred Heart?

What would you say is Sacred Heart's highest priority as a school?

What does Sacred Heart do that differentiates it from other schools?

One of the aspects the school cites as a source of distinction is the classical curriculum. How do you understand the role of the classical curriculum in the life of the school?

Imagine you had a friend who was hesitant to send their children to Sacred Heart. What do you suspect would be their source of concern?

How do you think the school ought to respond to these concerns?

As you know, parents receive notice each August of who their child's teacher will be for the school year. In between receiving that letter and meeting the teacher, there can often be some speculation about who the teacher is and how they plan to organize the class. If you were imagining in this way the ideal teacher and the ideal classroom environment: what would that look like?

What role do you think Catholic religious practices should play in such an ideal classroom?

How is this role similar or different to the role Catholic religious practices play in the actual classrooms of Sacred Heart today?

Before we finish, I'm interested in hearing the perspective of a diverse group of parents from all across the Sacred Heart community. Are there any other parents that you believe would be willing to share their perspective with me?

Thank you so much for meeting with me today, and for sharing your perspective!

Appendix F-3: Interview #3 Protocol

First, thank you Mrs. Archdiocesan Official for meeting with me today! Would you mind if I record this interview?

Before we begin, let me ask: how long have you been in your role at the Archdiocese?

What was your pathway to becoming [this role]?

What would you say are the most important decisions you make in your role as [Archdiocesan Official]?

When you and the Archdiocese make an important decision, how do schools react to these policy changes?

Are there any decisions and policy changes that you would like to make, but can't because of how students and families would react?

Are there any decisions and policy changes that you would like to make, but can't because of state regulation?

Considering teaching and learning in particular, what would you look for to assess excellence at the school level?

How effectively do you believe the schools in the Archdiocese accomplish these goals for excellence?

How does being Catholic interact with these goals for teaching and learning excellence?

What aspects of Catholic school teaching and learning do you believe are most important?

What aspects distinguish Catholic school teaching and learning from that of public schools?

Some school curricula focus on having a strong Catholic theology class, while others attempt to embed Catholic ideas throughout the curriculum, such as in science and history classes. Which of these do you think is more effective at communicating the Catholic intellectual tradition?

I'd like to ask you about the Archdiocese's relationship with Sacred Heart Academy. How frequently do you interact with the administration at Sacred Heart?

Considering Sacred Heart, what do you believe is the school's most important priority with regard to teaching and learning?

What aspects of Sacred Heart differentiate it from other schools?

What decisions do you think the leadership at Sacred Heart have made in order to create this distinction?

Based on your knowledge of teaching and learning in Catholic schools, what challenges do you think are the most important for Sacred Heart to address?

Thank you so much for sitting down with me and sharing your perspective!

Appendix F-4: Interview #4 Protocol

First, thank you Fr. Pastor for sitting down with me today. Would you mind if I record this interview?

Before I begin, let me ask: how long have you been pastor at Sacred Heart?

What was your pathway to becoming pastor?

What is your favorite part of the role of pastor?

What part of the role do you find most challenging?

As pastor of the connecting parish, you have a special connection to the Catholic identity of Sacred Heart Academy. How would you describe your role in the school?

How would you describe the relationship between the Sacred Heart community, both the parish and the school, and the Archdiocese?

One way to understand the identity of a school is through decisions. When a hard decision comes up, in order to make that decision, schools often have to ask themselves, “who are we?” Can you describe a time where you faced a decision like this?

When you made that decision, what was it about the school that informed your choice?

What, in particular, does the school do to communicate its Catholic identity?

Please imagine the ideal Catholic elementary school. In what ways is the actual Sacred Heart similar to this ideal school, and in what ways is it different?

What barriers prevent the actual Sacred Heart Academy from realizing this ideal vision?

One somewhat unique aspect of Sacred Heart Academy is its classical curriculum. Do you believe this curriculum is connected to the Catholic identity of the school?

If so, what is it about the classical model that is Catholic?

Do you believe that a classical curriculum is more likely to foster Catholic identity, or do you believe that different schools can accomplish that goal in different ways?

Another way to understand the identity of a school is as a story. What kinds of stories do people tell about Sacred Heart?

What would you say is the story of Sacred Heart as understood by people outside the Sacred Heart community?

Regarding the Sacred Heart community, many, but not all of the families that attend Sacred Heart Academy are also parishioners at Sacred Heart parish. Which do you find more important: deepening connections within the parish, or reaching out to families across the Archdiocese?

How do you as pastor attract families to Sacred Heart parish?

How does the Catholic identity of Sacred Heart Academy affect its recruitment of students and families to the school?

Does a family have to be a Catholic family to be a fully participating member of the Sacred Heart school community?

If you were called in to advise a newly formed Catholic school as it was considering how to strengthen its Catholic school identity, what would you tell them?

Thank you again for sitting down with me and sharing your perspective!

Appendix F-5: Interview #5 Protocol

First, thank you Mrs. Teacher for sitting down with me today. Would you mind if I record this interview?

Before I begin, let me ask: how long have you been teaching at Sacred Heart?

What was your pathway to teaching?

What is your favorite part of being a teacher?

What part of teaching do you find most challenging?

I'd like to ask you about the Catholic identity of Sacred Heart as a school. What is the first thing you think of when you consider the school's Catholic identity?

What is the role of the school in this identity, in contrast to individual teachers instructing individual students on the aspects of Catholic thought and tradition?

One way to understand the identity of a school is through decisions. When a hard decision comes up, in order to make that decision, schools often have to ask themselves, "who are we?" Can you describe a time where you faced a decision like this?

When you made that decision, what was it about Sacred Heart that informed your choice?

Another way to understand the identity of a school is as a story. What kinds of stories do people tell about Sacred Heart?

What would you say is the story of Sacred Heart as understood by people outside the Sacred Heart community?

In what ways is the story of Sacred Heart different from the stories other schools might tell?

At Sacred Heart, what does it mean for a teacher to be an excellent teacher?

Does a Sacred Heart teacher have to be Catholic to be an excellent teacher?

One thing Sacred Heart is known for is its classical curriculum. Which aspects of this curriculum do you believe are most central to who Sacred Heart is as a school?

You played a significant role when the school transitioned to a classical curriculum. What was the school like before this change?

What was the goal that the transition to a classical curriculum was trying to accomplish?

When you wrote this new curriculum, you certainly had to make many decisions, both big and small. Can you tell me about a difficult decision that you made, and why you made it?

As a teacher in the school, you have to make decisions not just about curriculum but about pedagogy as well. Can you describe for me the process you use to make decisions about the how of teaching?

Teachers not only make decisions in their own classrooms, but they must respond to decisions made by administration. Can you tell me about a time that you may have disagreed with a decision the administration made, and how you responded to that disagreement?

Imagine an ideal Sacred Heart, perfect in every way. In what ways is that ideal Sacred Heart different from the actual Sacred Heart that exists today?

What barriers are there that prevent the actual Sacred Heart from becoming the ideal version you imagined?

Thank you again for sitting down with me and sharing your perspective!

Appendix F-6: Interview #6 Protocol

First, thank you Mrs. Former Principal for sitting down with me today. Would you mind if I record this interview?

I'd like to ask you about Catholic school identity, specifically the identity of Sacred Heart Academy. But before I do, I'd like to ask you about your current role as the [national Catholic education officer]. How long have you been in that role?

What kinds of decisions do you make in this role, and how do these decisions interact with your understanding of the identity of Catholic schools?

Prior to your work with the [role], you were director of school services for the [advocacy group]. Can you tell me a little about the work you did in that role?

How do you understand the interaction between Catholic school identity and Catholic liberal education?

I'd like to ask you about the Catholic identity of Sacred Heart as a school. What is the first thing you think of when you consider the school's Catholic identity?

What is the role of the school in this identity, in contrast to individual teachers instructing individual students on the aspects of Catholic thought and tradition?

In preparing for this interview, I read through your answers to the interview you gave to the Catholic School Playbook regarding Sacred Heart as a thriving school. I'd like to ask you to expand on some of the answers you gave there.

In the interview, you say: “I believe that the distinction of an excellent Catholic school lies in the degree to which the school conforms itself to the longstanding educational tradition of the Church. That is, it adapts a Catholic worldview in its pedagogy and curriculum, emphasizing the harmony of faith and reason, the goals of wisdom and virtue, and the understanding of the nature of the human person and of reality itself.” Could you please share a bit more detail on how the tradition of the Church and its understanding of Christian anthropology show up visibly in the daily life of a Catholic school?

In the interview, you say: “The integration of subjects - whether in the context itself or through pedagogical methods - allows the student to glimpse the beauty and complexity of the created world.” What does an integrated math class look like in a school like this? In the other direction, what does an integrated religion class look like?

Is it possible for secular schools to have an integrated curriculum?

In the interview, you discussed various ways to include families in the educational project, recognizing the primacy of the parent as educator. Did you ever have parents who resisted being a part of the community in this way? How did you handle that?

When you transitioned to the classical model, were there families and teachers who decided not to participate in the school community because this new model conflicted with their idea of what a school should look like? Did you attempt to recruit these families and teachers back into the community?

Financial considerations dominated much of the discussion about Sacred Heart as a thriving school. Can you describe a decision you made that had to balance the identity of the school on one side, and the financial realities of operating a school on the other?

In the interview, you say: “Thriving schools know who they are and they have a well-articulated vision that is understood by their faculty, staff, and students.” What signs would you look for in a school that “knows who they are” as opposed to a school that doesn’t?

What would you say is the most important factor separating a school with a strong Catholic identity from other types of schools?

Thank you again for sitting down with me and sharing your perspective!

Appendix F-7: Interview #7 Protocol

First, thank you Mrs. Parent for sitting down with me today. Would you mind if I record this interview?

I'd like to ask you a bit about your perspective as a parent of students in the school. Why did your family choose Sacred Heart?

What would you say is Sacred Heart's highest priority as a school?

What does Sacred Heart do that differentiates it from other schools?

One of the aspects the school cites as a source of distinction is the classical curriculum.

How do you understand the role of the classical curriculum in the life of the school?

Imagine you had a friend who was hesitant to send their children to Sacred Heart. What do you suspect would be their source of concern?

How do you think the school ought to respond to these concerns?

Imagine, if you will, that Sacred Heart was provided a grant giving it essentially unlimited financial resources. How do you think that grant would change the school?

As you know, parents receive notice each August of who their child's teacher will be for the school year. In between receiving that letter and meeting the teacher, there can often be some speculation about who the teacher is and how they plan to organize the class. If you

were imagining in this way the ideal teacher and the ideal classroom environment: what would that look like?

What role do you think Catholic religious practices should play in such an ideal classroom?

How is this role similar or different to the role Catholic religious practices play in the actual classrooms of Sacred Heart today?

Thank you so much for meeting with me today, and for sharing your perspective!

Appendix F-8: Interview #8 Protocol

First, thank you Mr. and Mrs. Parents for sitting down with me today. Would you mind if I record this interview?

I'd like to ask you a bit about your perspective as a parent of students in the school. Why did your family choose Sacred Heart?

What would you say is Sacred Heart's highest priority as a school?

What does Sacred Heart do that differentiates it from other schools?

One of the aspects the school cites as a source of distinction is the classical curriculum.

How do you understand the role of the classical curriculum in the life of the school?

Imagine you had a friend who was hesitant to send their children to Sacred Heart. What do you suspect would be their source of concern?

How do you think the school ought to respond to these concerns?

Imagine, if you will, that Sacred Heart was provided a grant giving it essentially unlimited financial resources. How do you think that grant would change the school?

As you know, parents receive notice each August of who their child's teacher will be for the school year. In between receiving that letter and meeting the teacher, there can often be some speculation about who the teacher is and how they plan to organize the class. If you

were imagining in this way the ideal teacher and the ideal classroom environment: what would that look like?

What role do you think Catholic religious practices should play in such an ideal classroom?

How is this role similar or different to the role Catholic religious practices play in the actual classrooms of Sacred Heart today?

Thank you so much for meeting with me today, and for sharing your perspective!

Appendix F-9: Interview #9 Protocol

First, thank you Mrs. Teacher for sitting down with me today. Would you mind if I record this interview?

Before I begin, let me ask: how long have you been teaching at Sacred Heart?

What was your pathway to teaching?

What is your favorite part of being a teacher?

What part of teaching do you find most challenging?

I'd like to ask you about the Catholic identity of Sacred Heart as a school. What is the first thing you think of when you consider the school's Catholic identity?

What is the role of the school in this identity, in contrast to individual teachers instructing individual students on the aspects of Catholic thought and tradition?

One way to understand the identity of a school is through decisions. When a hard decision comes up, in order to make that decision, schools often have to ask themselves, "who are we?" Can you describe a time where you faced a decision like this?

When you made that decision, what was it about Sacred Heart that informed your choice?

Another way to understand the identity of a school is as a story. What kinds of stories do people tell about Sacred Heart?

What would you say is the story of Sacred Heart as understood by people outside the Sacred Heart community?

In what ways is the story of Sacred Heart different from the stories other schools might tell?

At Sacred Heart, what does it mean for a teacher to be an excellent teacher?

Does a Sacred Heart teacher have to be Catholic to be an excellent teacher?

One thing Sacred Heart is known for is its classical curriculum. Which aspects of this curriculum do you believe are most central to who Sacred Heart is as a school?

As a teacher in the school, you have to make decisions not just about curriculum but about pedagogy as well. Can you describe for me the process you use to make decisions about the how of teaching?

Teachers not only make decisions in their own classrooms, but they must respond to decisions made by administration. Can you tell me about a time that you may have disagreed with a decision the administration made, and how you responded to that disagreement?

Imagine an ideal Sacred Heart, perfect in every way. In what ways is that ideal Sacred Heart different from the actual Sacred Heart that exists today?

What barriers are there that prevent the actual Sacred Heart from becoming the ideal version you imagined?

Thank you again for sitting down with me and sharing your perspective!

Appendix F-10: Interview #10 Protocol

First, thank you Mrs. Teacher for sitting down with me today. Would you mind if I record this interview?

Before I begin, let me ask: how long have you been teaching at Sacred Heart?

What was your pathway to teaching?

What is your favorite part of being a teacher?

What part of teaching do you find most challenging?

I'd like to ask you about the Catholic identity of Sacred Heart as a school. What is the first thing you think of when you consider the school's Catholic identity?

What is the role of the school in this identity, in contrast to individual teachers instructing individual students on the aspects of Catholic thought and tradition?

One way to understand the identity of a school is through decisions. When a hard decision comes up, in order to make that decision, schools often have to ask themselves, "who are we?" Can you describe a time where you faced a decision like this?

When you made that decision, what was it about Sacred Heart that informed your choice?

Another way to understand the identity of a school is as a story. What kinds of stories do people tell about Sacred Heart?

What would you say is the story of Sacred Heart as understood by people outside the Sacred Heart community?

In what ways is the story of Sacred Heart different from the stories other schools might tell?

At Sacred Heart, what does it mean for a teacher to be an excellent teacher?

Does a Sacred Heart teacher have to be Catholic to be an excellent teacher?

One thing Sacred Heart is known for is its classical curriculum. Which aspects of this curriculum do you believe are most central to who Sacred Heart is as a school?

As a teacher in the school, you have to make decisions not just about curriculum but about pedagogy as well. Can you describe for me the process you use to make decisions about the how of teaching?

Teachers not only make decisions in their own classrooms, but they must respond to decisions made by administration. Can you tell me about a time that you may have disagreed with a decision the administration made, and how you responded to that disagreement?

Imagine an ideal Sacred Heart, perfect in every way. In what ways is that ideal Sacred Heart different from the actual Sacred Heart that exists today?

What barriers are there that prevent the actual Sacred Heart from becoming the ideal version you imagined?

Thank you again for sitting down with me and sharing your perspective!

Appendix F-11: Interview #11 Protocol

First, thank you Mrs. [Teacher] for sitting down with me today. Would you mind if I record this interview?

Before I begin, let me ask: how long have you been teaching at Sacred Heart?

What was your pathway to teaching?

What is your favorite part of being a teacher?

What part of teaching do you find most challenging?

I'd like to ask you about the Catholic identity of Sacred Heart as a school. What is the first thing you think of when you consider the school's Catholic identity?

What is the role of the school in this identity, in contrast to individual teachers instructing individual students on the aspects of Catholic thought and tradition?

One way to understand the identity of a school is through decisions. When a hard decision comes up, in order to make that decision, schools often have to ask themselves, "who are we?" Can you describe a time where you faced a decision like this?

When you made that decision, what was it about Sacred Heart that informed your choice?

Another way to understand the identity of a school is as a story. What kinds of stories do people tell about Sacred Heart?

What would you say is the story of Sacred Heart as understood by people outside the Sacred Heart community?

In what ways is the story of Sacred Heart different from the stories other schools might tell?

At Sacred Heart, what does it mean for a teacher to be an excellent teacher?

Does a Sacred Heart teacher have to be Catholic to be an excellent teacher?

One thing Sacred Heart is known for is its classical curriculum. Which aspects of this curriculum do you believe are most central to who Sacred Heart is as a school?

As a teacher in the school, you have to make decisions not just about curriculum but about pedagogy as well. Can you describe for me the process you use to make decisions about the how of teaching?

Teachers not only make decisions in their own classrooms, but they must respond to decisions made by administration. Can you tell me about a time that you may have disagreed with a decision the administration made, and how you responded to that disagreement?

Imagine an ideal Sacred Heart, perfect in every way. In what ways is that ideal Sacred Heart different from the actual Sacred Heart that exists today?

What barriers are there that prevent the actual Sacred Heart from becoming the ideal version you imagined?

Thank you again for sitting down with me and sharing your perspective!

Appendix F-12: Interview #12 Protocol

First, thank you Mrs. Parent for sitting down with me today. Would you mind if I record this interview?

I'd like to ask you a bit about your perspective as a parent of students in the school. Why did your family choose Sacred Heart?

What would you say is Sacred Heart's highest priority as a school?

What does Sacred Heart do that differentiates it from other schools?

One of the aspects the school cites as a source of distinction is the classical curriculum.

How do you understand the role of the classical curriculum in the life of the school?

Imagine you had a friend who was hesitant to send their children to Sacred Heart. What do you suspect would be their source of concern?

How do you think the school ought to respond to these concerns?

Imagine, if you will, that Sacred Heart was provided a grant giving it essentially unlimited financial resources. How do you think that grant would change the school?

As you know, parents receive notice each August of who their child's teacher will be for the school year. In between receiving that letter and meeting the teacher, there can often be some speculation about who the teacher is and how they plan to organize the class. If you

were imagining in this way the ideal teacher and the ideal classroom environment: what would that look like?

What role do you think Catholic religious practices should play in such an ideal classroom?

How is this role similar or different to the role Catholic religious practices play in the actual classrooms of Sacred Heart today?

Thank you so much for meeting with me today, and for sharing your perspective!

Appendix F-13: Interview #13 Protocol

First, thank you for sitting down with me today. Would you mind if I record this interview?

I'd like to ask you a bit about your perspective as a parent of students in the school. Why did your family choose Sacred Heart?

What would you say is Sacred Heart's highest priority as a school?

What does Sacred Heart do that differentiates it from other schools?

One of the aspects the school cites as a source of distinction is the classical curriculum.

How do you understand the role of the classical curriculum in the life of the school?

Imagine you had a friend who was hesitant to send their children to Sacred Heart. What do you suspect would be their source of concern?

How do you think the school ought to respond to these concerns?

Imagine, if you will, that Sacred Heart was provided a grant giving it essentially unlimited financial resources. How do you think that grant would change the school?

As you know, parents receive notice each August of who their child's teacher will be for the school year. In between receiving that letter and meeting the teacher, there can often be some speculation about who the teacher is and how they plan to organize the class. If you were imagining in this way the ideal teacher and the ideal classroom environment: what would that look like?

What role do you think Catholic religious practices should play in such an ideal classroom?

How is this role similar or different to the role Catholic religious practices play in the actual classrooms of Sacred Heart today?

Thank you so much for meeting with me today, and for sharing your perspective!

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