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On the Catholic Identity of Students and Schools: Value Propositions for Catholic Education

Daniel Lapsley[1] and Katheryn Kelley[1]

Abstract: The Catholic school sector is under significant stress with declining enrollments and schools closing in virtually every diocese in the United States. This paper examines two value propositions for Catholic education. One is its role in providing foundational support for the development of a personal, chosen religious-spiritual identity across the life course. The second is the contribution of Catholic education to moral-character formation. Both propositions are relatively underdeveloped. The question of students' personal spiritual identity is overshadowed by the understandable concern with the Catholic identity of schools. The question of moral-character formation is subsumed by catechesis and liturgy but is often remanded to the hidden curriculum. We argue that Catholic education can make a powerful claim on parents and students to the extent that explicit attention is drawn to religious-spiritual identity and moral-character formation. Several features of the Catholic school advantage with respect to school ethos can be recruited to this end. Directions for future research are noted.

Keywords: identity, youth, individuation, development, religiosity, spirituality

The Catholic school sector is under significant stress with declining enrollments and schools closing in virtually every diocese in the United States, with nearly 100 school closures each year (National Catholic Education Association [NCEA], 2022). This stress is most evident in primary schools, but secondary schools also show evidence of enrollment decline. The rise of public charter schools has confronted parents and educators with a value proposition with respect to the

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Catholic school option: Why should it be the preferred option? Why is it distinctive? What would justify tuition when tax supported public options are available?

In this paper we argue that the Catholic identity of students and their moral-character formation are two strong value propositions for Catholic education, and that both are relatively underdeveloped topics that require better specification and more extensive research. Although there is extensive discourse on the Catholic identity of *schools*, we argue that something more is required that addresses the religious identity and moral formation of *students*. After highlighting the importance of Catholic identity for schools, we review recent evidence on the religiosity of youth who attend Catholic schools and urge a developmental perspective to better understand these trends. This perspective underscores the need to consider broader contextual influences on youth spirituality beyond the narrow confines of the school proper, but it also draws attention to salutary features of the effective Catholic high school for laying the foundation for enduring Catholic spiritual identity.

We next take up the second value proposition that Catholic schools teach important values and provide a rich context for moral-character formation. This objective is shared with good education generally and, indeed, has close counterparts in public education (Arthur et al., 2017). If there is a distinct Catholic school advantage with respect to moral formation then it requires better articulation in order to support the value proposition of why Catholic education should be a preferred option.

Catholic Identity of Schools

Much of the recent discourse on Catholic education has focused on how to describe and assure the Catholic identity of schools (Alvis & Lamothe, 2016; Buetow, 1988; Schuttloffel, 2012; Stabile, 2002; Youniss et al., 2000), including schools of higher education (Estanek et al., 2006). Its fundamental importance is affirmed by authoritative teachings of the Holy See and various episcopal conferences (USCCB, 1972; Miller 2006). The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education (1977) noted, for example, the essential service that Catholic schools perform for the church and how it contributes to its saving mission for education of the faithful (pp. 8, 15). In the 1997 document *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, Cardinal Prefect Laghi underscored the ecclesial identity of the Catholic school and its role "at the heart" of the church's evangelizing mission (p. 11). "By reason of its identity, therefore, the Catholic school is a place of ecclesial experience which is molded in the Christian community" (p. 12). Consequently, there must be "a clear realization of the identity of the Catholic school and the courage to follow all of the consequences of its uniqueness" (p. 66).

Given its centrality in church teaching, it is perhaps not surprising that Catholic identity was acknowledged as a pressing concern facing Catholic schools in a national survey of pastors in the

United States (Nuzzi et al., 2008). It has attracted important work on the articulation of Catholic identity standards for Catholic elementary and secondary schools and also efforts to measure its various components. For example, the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness (2012) developed three standards around mission and identity in its National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools. An excellent Catholic school, according to these standards, is guided by a clear, publicly disseminated mission statement that embraces a Catholic identity (Standard 1), provides a "rigorous academic program for religious studies and catechesis in the Catholic faith" (Standard 2), and provides "opportunities outside the classroom for student faith formation, participation in liturgical and communal prayer, and action in the service of social justice" (Standard 3). In other words, the Catholic faith must be visibly known, explicitly taught, and widely implemented in schools that strongly identify with the Catholic mission.

Core constituent elements of Catholic identity were also targeted for comprehensive assessment by Nuzzi and Holter (2010). In their view, Catholic schools are distinctly: *Christian* (constant reference to the Gospels and the salvific mission of Jesus), *Sacramental* (marked by comprehensive liturgical life that follows the rhythm of the liturgical year), *Canonical* (maintains a strong relationship with the local Bishop), *Ecclesiological* (contributes to the common good through works of charity, justice, and service), *Catechetical* (the religious education is conducted by certified catechists with approved texts), and *Educational* (offers a rigorous academic curriculum as required by Canon Law [Canon 806.2]), among other elements.

Catholic Identity of Students?

Cultivating and maintaining the Catholic identity of schools, then, is a fundamental concern of the field of Catholic education. What about the Catholic identity of *students*? This question is not addressed nearly as frequently or as urgently as the Catholic identity of schools. It is assumed that Catholic education will rub off on students in a way that makes a discernible difference to their academic, moral, and spiritual formation. Catholic education should bring value-added considerations (compared to public options), perhaps because it teaches the whole child and imbues students with a moral compass that orients toward faith-inspired values.

As a result, students who are products of schools with a strong Catholic identity should come to possess certain qualities. In addition to academic benefits we expect students to exhibit a commitment to the Christian journey of faith in the Catholic tradition, a lively spiritual and religious life actively practiced, a moral character structured around important virtues, and an informed conscience that carries the Cross to the public sphere as engaged citizens who care about social justice, the common good, and the quality of civic life. Insofar as the very mission of Christian education is to "teach doctrine, to build community, and to serve" (USCCB, 1972, p. 33), it is expected that students who graduate from Catholic schools will bear a distinctive mark of religious

and moral formation that endures and is manifested in service to church and community.

First Value Proposition: Catholic Identity of Students

Are there empirical grounds for thinking that Catholic education leaves a distinctive mark on the religious formation of youth? There is some encouraging evidence from several decades ago. Sander (2001) showed, for example, using 1988 and 1989 data from the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey, that respondents who attended Catholic schools were more likely to pray daily, attend church more often, and retain a Catholic identity as adults, especially respondents with more years of Catholic education (9-12 years).

Yet more recent research from the robust National Study of Youth and Religion [NSYR] (Smith & Snell, 2009; Smith et al., 2014) should give Catholic educators pause. According to Smith and colleagues (2014), the study found that "the effects of attending a Catholic high school and belonging to a youth group on religious faith and practice in emerging adulthood are mixed, modest and a bit complicated" (p. 232). By the time Catholic youth enter emerging adulthood they tend to lag behind non-Catholic peers on a range of religiosity indicators (e.g., attending services, frequency of prayer, affirming that religion is important in their lives) and attending Catholic high school does not seem to stop the slide. Nevertheless, teenagers who attend Catholic schools are more religious than their Catholic peers who attend other types of schools, most likely because religious observance — including prayer, catechesis, and attending liturgical services — are woven into the fabric of the school day.

Yet, as Smith et al. (2014) point out, "this difference disappears in the transition to emerging adulthood so that five years down the road the two groups are approximately equally likely to attend Mass regularly, pray often, and consider religion very important" (p. 252). Put differently, the adolescent Catholic school advantage in religiosity over Catholic youth who attend other schools is not sustained in the years following high school graduation.

Moreover, even the Catholic school advantage in religiosity observed during adolescence and emerging adulthood may be an artifact of selection effects; insofar as the direct relationship between Catholic schooling and adolescent religiosity washes out once parents' level of religiousness is accounted for (Uecker, 2009). Hence, "the higher levels of religiousness of Catholic-schooled young people, both as teens and in emerging adulthood, are driven more by Catholic schools' selection of highly religious teenagers than by their direct impact on teenage and emerging adulthood religiousness" (Smith et al., 2014, p. 247).

These findings are derived from the analysis of continuous variables in the NSYR data, and at first glance would seem to undermine a strong claim for a Catholic school advantage for inducing youth into lifelong spirituality and religious practice. Although this evidence is concerning, the

analysis of categorical variables by Smith et al. (2014) provides more encouraging insights and possible new lines of research for the field of Catholic education. For example, Smith et al. (2014) showed that attending Catholic school is important for moving teenagers from the "minimal" to "moderate" religious category as emerging adults and for preventing religious indifference. In their view, Catholic school attendance not only provides religious training, but also access to social networks and role models that can boost and sustain the practice of religious faith in emerging adulthood. This is particularly meaningful for youth whose parents are only minimally religious and who otherwise lack exposure to and support of non-parental religious adults (Smith et al., 2014).

This latter finding was evident in the qualitative comparative analysis of factors that contribute to higher levels of religiousness in emerging adulthood. Four trajectories or pathways were associated with higher levels of religiousness in emerging adulthood, based on combinations of teenager-era factors. Attending Catholic high school made a difference in only one pathway (Path 3), which included low parental religious service attendance and having few supportive adults in the religious congregation, suggesting that Catholic schooling can compensate for adult relational networks that provide scant support for religious practice.

But parental and other adult congregational support is also important. Having parents who frequently attend religious services is a significant factor in two pathways (Path 1 and Path 4), and having meaningful relationships with other adults in the religious congregation also show up as significant factors in two pathways (Path 1 and Path 2). Clearly, family and non-parental support in the parish are important sources of influence on adolescents' spiritual and religious growth. On these grounds, it is perhaps advisable, as Rossiter (2003) argues, to lower expectations that the Catholic school alone can drive religious and spiritual change without understanding its dynamic relationship with other contextual sources of influence among peers, family, and parish.

In this sense, the Catholic school is only one part of the overall context of religious identity development. This context also includes family beliefs and practices, peer affiliations and parish involvement, which together make up a religious "plausibility structure" — that is, the sociocultural framework that makes a meaning system believable (Berger, 1967). Greater engagement in a plausibility structure can bolster religious belief (Ammerman, 2013) and increase identity domain strength and salience (Ammerman, 2018; Ecklund & Park, 2009; Layton et al., 2011; Petersen, 2001). If highly religious families already integrated into parish life then send their children to Catholic school, the additional effect of Catholic schooling might be minimal (Uecker, 2008). On the other hand, nominal Catholic families who send their children to Catholic school might be introducing their children to a religious plausibility structure that they would not otherwise encounter, significantly boosting the likelihood of these students developing a lasting connection with Catholicism.

Belief Plausibility

One way that Catholic schools contribute to a religious plausibility structure is by supporting the development of religious belief. There is increasing evidence from cognitive psychology research that underscores the importance of K-8 education in Christian belief formation. In one foundational study, researchers asked children from Christian and nonreligious schools questions about where certain animals originally "came from" (Evans, 2001). Overwhelmingly, the youngest age group (ages 5-7) chose a creationist account of the animals' origins, and belief in creationist accounts dropped precipitously with age. This was not the case for attendees of Christian schools, who consistently gave creationist explanations at all ages. Evans concluded that school attendance was the primary source of the difference in belief between the two cohorts, suggesting that a religious educational community provides both the narrative and the context within which children deem the narrative plausible (Evans, 2001).

Research suggests that this is because religious adults talk differently about supernatural entities than nonreligious adults. McLoughlin and colleagues (2021) observed parent-child dyads in conversation about two types of invisible entities: scientific and religious. When speaking about religious entities, parents expressed more uncertainty, mentioned variation in people's beliefs regarding those entities, and made explicit claims about their ontological status. But this pattern was tempered by religiosity: the more religious the parent was, the less likely they were to express these "uncertainty cues" regarding religious entities. Their children picked up on this; parents' confidence closely predicted children's ontological judgements of these entities. The authors conclude that "subtle variation in adult testimony surrounding scientific and supernatural unobservable entities contributes to children's developing beliefs in their existence" (McLoughlin et al., 2021, p. 11).

This pattern holds true even for nonparental adults. In another study of children aged 5-6, those who attended a religious school were significantly more likely to categorize religious stories as "real" or believe their veracity; school attendance had an even stronger effect than parental religious endorsement (Vaden & Woolley, 2011). This finding has been replicated in several cross-cultural studies (Corriveau et al., 2015; Cui et al., 2020; Davoodi et al., 2019) and is strongest when children perceive that there is a consensus from the adults around them regarding supernatural entities, that is, when most adults in the child's life share such a view (Harris et al., 2018). When these beliefs are shared by most of the child's social world, they become taken-for-granted, part of the "givens" that govern the context in which cognition develops, and thus are more likely to be internalized by the child (Ammerman, 2018).

There is also evidence that secondary education contributes to the maintenance of religious beliefs. Longitudinal research found that "school religious climate" was a protective factor against

religious decline in adolescence (Regnerus & Uecker, 2006); other studies have indicated that "meaningful" religious education, warm relationships with teachers, and school climate all contribute to adolescent religious formation, primarily through the mechanism of religious identity development (Cohen-Malayev et al., 2014).

Spiritual and Religious Identity

Another mechanism through which a religious plausibility structure works is by increasing the likelihood that Catholicism is part of a student's self-identity. Social identity theory argues that the self-system is a collection of personal and social identities (Tajfel, 1981). For most individuals the self-system is a mélange of collective and personal identities. A collective identity defines a person in terms of the characteristics that are associated with membership in groups to which one has chosen or been assigned. A personal identity defines a person in terms of characteristics that are thought to be unique, distinctive, and individuating. An individual's Catholic identity can be a personal identity (based on the centrality of religious belief to one's sense of self) as well as a collective identity as a member of the Catholic Church.

One challenge is that self-definition for just about everyone is built around multiple personal and social identities that co-exist at different levels of centrality and importance. The same individual can identify with many self-defining attributes, including political party, ideology, lifestyle, sexuality, occupational role, sports teams, and also religious, spiritual and faith commitments (or the absence of these commitments), among many others, and how these coalesce to organize personality and motivate behavior is the target of significant traditions of research within the various social sciences. Cognitive maturity may contribute to an individual's ability to resolve identity conflicts, and religious education may help. It stands to reason that students who are better able to grapple with the complexities of their religion are also better equipped to integrate religion into other aspects of their self-identity. This is consistent with research demonstrating that other identity changes can precipitate religious changes in adolescence (Lopez et al., 2011; Regnerus & Uecker, 2006) and emerging adulthood (Rockenbach et al., 2012), and that when moral and religious identity are entwined (i.e., through explicitly religious moral education), both identity aspects are stronger (Kelley et al., 2021).

Engagement with Catholic education may also boost the centrality and importance of Catholicism for a student's self-identity. There is some evidence in the NSYR data that such is the case, although it is not explicitly connected to identity per se (and we will introduce further distinctions below). In the qualitative comparative analysis noted earlier, only one variable showed up in all four pathways from teenage-era experience to emerging adulthood religiosity, and that was the *high importance that adolescents themselves place on religious faith*. Put differently, there was no trajectory of religiosity from adolescence to emerging adulthood, no combination of teenage-era

factors, that did not also include the young person's own valuation of religious faith as something important in their lives. Smith et al. (2014) suggest that this mechanism is influenced by Catholic school attendance. They write:

> Catholic schools seem to create in students a bond to the Catholic faith…a type of loose 'brand loyalty' causing emerging adults to feel compelled to keep it as at least a small part of who they are, but not to identify with it so closely that it is a central aspect of their lives, at least during that phase of life.
>
> *(p.253)*

In their view, Catholic high school attendance serves as "a cognitive indicator to teenagers that being Catholic is part of who they are and should remain" (Smith et al., 2014, pp. 254-255), although Catholic schools may not do much otherwise to increase their religiousness.

Hence how to understand identity formation around Catholic faith, spirituality and religious practice is an urgent question that presents a number of challenges for the field of Catholic education. What is it about Catholic schools that promote "brand loyalty" and identification with Catholic indicators of self-identity? To complicate matters further, religious identity can also take many forms, even within a single tradition. Arbuckle (2013) identified 13 types of Catholic identity that seemed to emerge from the reforms of Vatican II and postmodernity. He writes:

> People still claim to be Catholic, but they freely choose for themselves what that means. Rejecting many of the traditional markers of Catholic identities, they refuse to take seriously the teaching authority of the church's dogmas or moral teachings, though they might continue to send their children to Catholic schools. Many choose new religious forms that give them a more personalized experience of community and God.
>
> *(p. 61)*

We do not gainsay the influence of Vatican II or postmodernity on encouraging the proliferation of Catholic identities, nor do we deny that many Catholics seem to "freely choose for themselves what that means." But additional insight on how "freely choosing" plays out in the experience of youth in Catholic schools is forthcoming from developmental research on religious identity.

A Developmental Perspective

For several analyses in the NSYR data, four religious variables (e.g., attend Mass, pray regularly, read Scripture, and consider religion personally important) were often combined to form a general index of religiosity. Although useful, this may have elided distinctions often made in the developmental psychology of religion. One distinction is between religiosity and spirituality; another is the difference between personal and collective (or social) identity. Both distinctions are related to developmental processes of identity and individuation that are typical of adolescence and emerging adulthood and may account for religiosity trends observed for Catholic youth.

Religiosity and Spirituality. Religiosity is sometimes considered a broad-band construct that is not explicitly differentiated from spirituality (Mahoney, 2021), although researchers have found it useful to do so (Zinnbauer et al., 1999). A standard distinction is that religiosity is to seek the sacred and divine by means of formal religious and ritualistic observance in institutional church settings (Smith, 2017). Spirituality, in contrast, is a more personal and private project of seeking the sacred and divine, or else transcendent meaning or purpose, outside of institutional settings or apart from ritualistic practice of formal religions (Astin et al., 2011b). On this account, one could be spiritual but not religious. Indeed, many individuals claim the option of spiritual seeking without religious observance. That is, the search for transcendent meaning and purpose is undertaken without joining a church, attending religious services, or otherwise participating in the formal or ritual activities of a denominational religious community. For example, while most teens pray and believe in God, a substantial portion of the adolescent population claim that organized religion does not play an important role in their lives (Wallace et al., 2003).

Getting a fix on age trends in religiosity is complicated further by the fact that religiosity is a multidimensional construct that includes religious *affiliation* (association with a religious institution or denomination), religious *identity* (sense of group membership that is important to self-concept) and religious *participation* (extent of engagement in religious activities); and because these can follow different trajectories, it may not be useful to form an omnibus religiosity variable that combines them (King & Boyatzis, 2004). For example, there is evidence that religious identity is stable across adolescence even while religious participation declines (Lopez et al., 2011). Moreover, declines in participation in organized religious activities can be offset by reported gains in spirituality, particularly as the adolescent transitions through emerging adulthood (Astin et al., 2011a; Pearce & Denton, 2011; Lefkowitz, 2005).

Chosen Identity. Whether there is growth or stagnation in religiosity or spirituality over the course of adolescence and emerging adulthood will hinge on the timing and nature of identity development and on the individuating impulse of self-development. When Smith and colleagues (2014) note the role of Catholic education in fostering cognitive markers of "brand loyalty," reference is being made to a collective identity that is built around group membership that defines one as "Catholic." One is typically socialized within a faith tradition. "When parents include their children in religious activity participation and/or stress the importance of their religion, children may accept a religious identity much like an assigned identity rather than as a chosen identity" (Templeton & Eccles, 2006, p. 258).

But at some point, assigned identities must come to feel chosen; collective identities must be transmuted into something individuating and personal. Adolescence is a developmental period where reappraisal of assigned and chosen commitments is common and where new possibilities for collective and personal identification are considered. Tanner (2006) calls this process "recentering",

and it is hardly completed by emerging adulthood. In one study, the religious beliefs of emerging adults were found to be highly individualized, with a premium placed on the formation of beliefs felt to be distinctly one's own (Arnett & Jensen, 2002). Not to embrace handed-down belief systems uncritically is an important part of identity exploration, and for at least some emerging adults "simply to accept what their parents have taught them about religion and carry on the same religious tradition as their parents would represent a kind of failure, an abdication of their responsibility to think for themselves" (Arnett & Jensen, 2002, p. 463).

Yet conscious reappraisal of belief systems could also lead to a renewed commitment to collective religious identity or to a personal spiritual identity that has distinctive features not necessarily shared by others in the religious group. The "13 types of Catholic" lamented by Arbuckle (2013) could just as well point to moments in the developmental formation of personal spiritual identity as to the vagaries of Vatican II or postmodernism. Moreover, the distinction between personal and collective identity is not sharply drawn. Being Catholic can be either a collective or personal identity depending on its function for the individual, and certainly one's collective religious identity as Catholic can set guide-rails for how the individuating aspects of personal spiritual identity are constructed.

Conclusion

Catholic education can play a foundational role in pacing the development of spiritual identity in emerging adulthood and beyond. Templeton & Eccles (2006) argue that an experience with the transcendent and a developmental context that meets psychological needs for connection are important pathways to personal spiritual identity. These are precisely the source of the Catholic school advantage. The encounter with Jesus and the communitarian ethos of the Catholic school, the relational trust among professional staff, the inclusive language of parish, community and family, the very meaning of church, can establish a pathway for the formation of Catholic spiritual identity on the journey of faith throughout the life course.

This will require taking the long view of the benefits of Catholic education and its value proposition for the life of faith. In addition to legitimate concerns regarding the Catholic identity of schools, there must also be recognition that religious formation is moderated by normative developmental challenges of identity and individuation, and this will play out across the transition to adulthood as Catholic persons of faith reconcile matters of collective religious and personal spiritual identity. A research agenda also presents itself to the field of Catholic education. There is, at present, no suitable assessment(s) of Catholic collective or personal spiritual identity that goes beyond catechetical knowledge of dogma and doctrine. If Catholic education is broadly considered as a lifespan concern of the church, and not simply what happens in K-12 schools, then development of these assessments should be a high priority moving forward.

Second Value Proposition: Moral-Character Formation

A second value proposition of Catholic schools concerns its mission to teach the whole child with an unapologetic emphasis on moral and religious values as well as rigorous academic preparation. Of course the notion of whole child education is not limited to Catholic or faith-based schools. A version of holistic education can be traced to Dewey (1938). More recently the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) launched a Whole Child Initiative that underscores the importance of academically challenging curriculum but also healthy practices and lifestyle, active engagement and learning in physically and emotionally safe environments, and caring relationships with teachers. Similarly, the Developmental Studies Center (DSC) also understands its work as "pedagogy for the whole child" (Brunn, 2014, p. 263) that includes providing a caring, safe, and supportive environment where academic instruction is integrated with intentional social goals, where students are intrinsically motivated, and where learning situations are organized to maximize student thinking.

But the Catholic tradition of teaching the whole child brings something distinctive to its mission. As Robey put it, "By nature and mission these [Catholic] schools operate in such a way that moral choices and character values are just as strongly emphasized as educational performance" (2011, p. 18). Consider the dozen reasons why parents should consider enrolling their children in Catholic schools (NCEA, 2019). These reasons can be grouped under three headings: (1) moral-character formation, (2) academic preparation, and (3) religious and faith development. Under the first heading Catholic schools emphasize "moral development and self-discipline" and encourage students to value service to others, to respect self and others, and to become productive citizens and future leaders. Under the academic heading, Catholic schools are touted for having high standards for achievement, impressive graduation and college admission rates, and the availability of caring and dedicated professional staff to help students succeed.

Of course, "moral development" and "academic preparation" do not cleanly distinguish Catholic schools from schools in other (public, private) sectors. Indeed, the academic achievement considerations have counterparts in the ASCD and DSC approaches to teaching the whole child, and moral-character education is a pervasive and robust area of educational research and practice in schools of all kinds (Arthur, 2003; Arthur et al., 2017; Berkowitz et al., 2017; Lapsley & Yeager, 2013; Nucci et al., 2014).

Rather, it is the third category of religious and faith development that distinctively animates the work of the entire school and grounds both the formation of moral-character and the very purpose of academic preparation. "Molding habits has always been central to character education in Catholic schools," but this objective takes place in a school context permeated with Catholic faith and piety (Joseph, 2001, p. 55). Parents who send their children to Catholic schools consistently rank moral

development and school ethos as a top reason for doing so (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate [CARA], 2014; FADIC, 2018; Schultz, 2008). Religious parents also value their child receiving moral and religious education from "professionals" (Smith et al., 2020; Mahoney, 2021).

Yet it is by no means clear how the moral-character education (MCE) mission of Catholic schools is accomplished (Grace, 2002). Like the case of personal spiritual and religious identity noted earlier, it should not be assumed that the character-forming aspect of Catholic education is carried by the Catholic identity of the school alone. Indeed, as Grace (2002) noted,

> A visible pedagogy of direct religious teaching and instruction in the Catechism always coexists with an invisible pedagogy and hidden curriculum of Catholic personal formation in faith shaped by the whole school environment, its ethos, rituals, symbols and value climate.
>
> *(p. 50)*

A recent study of Catholic character education in UK schools illustrates the point (Devanny, 2018). In this study the strongest element supporting character education was school ethos characterized by unity of purpose, high quality relationships, and community service. But character education was only an implicit feature of the school day, a matter of "character caught" not "character taught." If there was a pedagogy of virtue it was invisible and hidden. Although the language of Gospel values was prominent as a visible pedagogy, there was a tendency for it "to be seen as platitudes which have no detectable or significant impact on character" (Devanny, 2018, p. 4). One study of Catholic school graduates found similar themes in participants' responses, with school ethos strongly predicting the perceived impact of moral-character education despite students' complaints regarding the cliché nature of any explicit instruction they received (Kelley & Laporte, 2020).

We are aware of no other systematic school-based investigation of Catholic moral-character education, so it is clearly unsafe to generalize these findings across the diocesan landscape. Indeed, moral-character education is expected to show up in many ways across the Catholic sector. A number of Catholic schools utilize explicit and integrated moral-character programs, most notably the Diocese of Sacramento's recent diocesan-wide implementation of the "Disciple of Christ, Education in Virtue" program in all elementary schools (FADIC, 2018).

Our general point is simply that the invisible pedagogy of personal formation, if remanded to the hidden curriculum, cannot be tended properly. It cannot be intentionally promoted, improved, or targeted for explicit instruction (Lapsley & Yeager, 2013), and this would miss an opportunity to make a strong value proposition for Catholic education. Moreover, while a strong communitarian school ethos that serves and reveals Gospel values is precisely a context that supports the formation of Catholic social and personal spiritual identity, as noted earlier, it would also serve as a foundation for an explicit, intentional, and visible pedagogy of moral, civic, and intellectual virtues. Spiritual

identity and moral-character formation, if conjoined as intentional and explicit objectives, would be two irresistible value propositions for Catholic education.

Conclusion

The Catholic school sector is under significant stress with declining enrollments and schools closing in virtually every diocese in the United States. The decline in enrollment is partly exacerbated by the rise and proliferation of charter public schools which provide cost-effective schooling options for parents who would otherwise struggle to pay parochial school tuition. In response, the Catholic education sector must clearly articulate its value proposition to parents and pastors. Although we reviewed disquieting evidence that students who attended Catholic secondary schools are not constant in religious observance, we argued that religiosity trends must be evaluated in light of normative developmental challenges of identity and individuation, and that a developmental perspective could highlight enduring benefits of Catholic education on personal spiritual identity considered across the life course.

Hence, the first value proposition concerns the role of Catholic education in structuring the identity work of young Catholics. The second value proposition concerns the role of Catholic education in structuring the character development of students. It is hardly a new idea that Catholic education must inculcate Christian values, form moral persons, and orient students to matters of justice and to tenets of Catholic social teaching. Although the ethos of Catholic schools is alive with Gospel values and catechetical formation of conscience, and this is rightly an important value proposition in its own right, our concern was with the hidden pedagogy of character development and the relative silence of the language of virtues in the daily life of schools. Given the dearth of school-based empirical research, it is not clear how pervasive intentional moral-character education is, although extant research reviewed here is not promising. That said, the Catholic intellectual tradition so deeply informed by Thomistic ethics would have ready resources for the design of moral-character pedagogy.

Hence the twin value propositions for Catholic education described here appeal to its promise in structuring personal spiritual identity and in structuring the moral personality. Whatever challenge these propositions hold for Catholic educators, there is also a challenge for researchers in the field of Catholic education. Two lines of research are urgently needed. One is to develop suitable assessments of spiritual and social Catholic identity, particularly assessments that track level of internalization of Catholic identity as something essential, important, and central to self-understanding. A second line of research will require a landscape analysis of where moral-character takes place in Catholic schools and the extent to which it includes virtues as part of its visible, intentional pedagogy. Both lines of research promise to make a significant contribution to the value-added claims of Catholic education.

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