

On the Emergent Field of Catholic Education

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Abstract

The contributions of Father Andrew Greeley and other pioneers are recalled, and the new challenges that confront the emergent field of Catholic education are described. The prerequisites to a field of study are reviewed. A field of study is marked by “disciplined inquiry” by a community of scholars into a shared problematic. A field of study begins with a problem, or set of related problems informed by theory, attracts and trains students; and funding. The “value-added” question, and the problem of Catholic identity, will be central to the field; and I propose an “Agape Model” of Catholic education that attempts to show how child development can be studied in a “climate that takes faith seriously.”

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I. Introduction: Father Andrew Greeley

I am very pleased indeed to have been asked provide some keynote remarks on this occasion, although I am also very conscious of the fact that I am a very poor substitute for Father Andrew Greeley.

Recently I had occasion to review some of the highlights of Father Greeley’s impressive career---the author of over 100 works of non-fiction and at least 50 best-selling novels, the many awards, honorary degrees, and now the Notre Dame award for contributions to Catholic education---this is an enviable record of accomplishment by any standard. But I also noticed that his biography intersects with mine in some crucial ways ---which I’m sure points toward some “Irish synchronicity” in the fact that I was asked to speak on an occasion that honors his achievements.

I noticed, for example, that in 1954 Father Greeley was awarded his License in Sacred Theology from St. Mary of the Lake Seminary; and was ordained to the priesthood in the same year. Turns out, that was also an important year for me---I was born in 1954.

In 1961, he published his first book, “*The Social Effects of Catholic Education*”---and a good thing, too, because that was the year that my twin brother and I joined 50 other first-graders at St. Joseph Catholic School in my hometown near Pittsburgh--- where Sister Mary Seraphica kept order with ferocious discipline over the social effects of the Catholic education practiced in her classroom.

In 1962, as a second-grader, I announced to Sister Mary Andrew my intentions to become a priest as I struggled to learn the Latin required of my service as an altar boy. Sure enough, that same year, Father Greeley finished his doctoral dissertation titled: “*The Influence of Religion on Career Plans.*”

And in 1981, when I needed a diversion from my doctoral work at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, doesn’t Father Greeley come through

again with his first novel, *The Cardinal Sins*---a steamy potboiler that, unfortunately, diverted me from my work for only a single day and one long night.

There doesn't seem to be a time when I was not aware of Father Greeley: through his journalism and columns in the Catholic and secular press, or his novels; or his important contributions to the sociology of education, probably in that order. Indeed it could be said rightly of Father Greeley what W.H. Auden (my favorite poet) once wrote of Sigmund Freud: "*to us he is no more a person, now but a whole climate of opinion under whom we conduct our different lives.*"

I invite everyone to go back and re-read his groundbreaking research on Catholic education, and that of his sometimes collaborator, James S. Coleman, to get a sense of the "climate of opinion" that prevailed at the time they were writing.

The prevailing assumption at the time was that Catholic schools were academically inferior to public schools, for a small host of reasons, including its limited resources, its truncated curriculum, the slight professional training of its teachers, the narrow religious perspective brought to its instruction, and so on. Catholic schools also were deemed at odds with the American ideal of common schools, and were held to be a divisive influence when it came to the civic socialization of students.

And yet the findings of Greeley, Coleman and their colleagues shattered such conventional wisdom, showing something startling and unexpected: Catholic schools were more effective academically than public schools. The average effect in one study was about one-grade level in mathematics, vocabulary and reading comprehension; and the effects were larger for minority and lower SES children

In a 1985 paper (Hoffer, Greeley & Coleman, 1985), using the High School and Beyond data, Greeley and his colleagues showed that the "Catholic school advantage" in academic achievement was not simply a matter of selection or of the relative absence of tracking in Catholic schools; nor was it related to the claim that Catholic schools eliminate

students with disciplinary problems; or that the advantage was related somehow to certain family characteristics ---these were the usual ways that the differential effectiveness of Catholic schools was explained away.

Instead, Greeley and his colleagues not only documented the differential effectiveness of Catholic schools over public schools in longitudinal analyses, but found that Catholic schools were *especially* beneficial to the *least* advantaged students; it was the most disadvantaged Catholic school students who were *most* likely to profit from attending a Catholic high school---those from lower SES backgrounds, those from the black and Hispanic communities, those with low test scores, those who start off with disciplinary problems. In this regard, Catholic high school education seemed to live up remarkably well to the exhortation of Catholic social teaching to exercise a "preferential option for the poor."

Moreover, their data showed that the difference between minority and non-minority students in public schools was not only larger than what it was in Catholic schools, *it grew* --it got larger-- between the sophomore and senior year (though it declined in Catholic schools). It was the Catholic schools, and not the "common schools," that lowered the achievement gaps and forged greater academic and social equality. As the authors put it, Catholic schools that were once thought to undermine the American ideal of the common school are actually "somewhat closer to the ideal than the public schools" (p. 96); a conclusion supported eight years later by Anthony Bryk, Valerie Lee and Peter Holland, in their seminal work *Catholic Schools and the Common Good*, a study that used very different methodology than did the Greeley team (Bryk, Lee & Holland, 1993).

Finally, Greeley and his colleagues reported evidence that might explain the Catholic school advantage. Catholic schools place in the academic track students whose test scores might have placed them in general and vocational tracks were they in public schools. Moreover, Catholic schools demand more homework and advanced courses, especially for disadvantaged students and students not in academic tracks ---so the curriculum is demanding and expectations are high. Finally, the authors suggest that lack of structure, lower demands and lower expectations are especially harmful for disadvantaged students, but these are more common

in public schools than in Catholic schools---and hence the Catholic school advantage with these kind of students.

Of course, any results that upset the conventional wisdom is likely to be contested, and these certainly were. There was a lively debate in the sociology of education literature that attempted to sort out just what is the Catholic school advantage; or if there is one. And so it goes in academic scholarship. But the mark of the pioneer is not to have the last word but to say it first. Saying the first word is the hardest part; saying it first requires the most vision, and courage and creativity; and on this score Father Andrew Greeley is the true pioneer in the study of Catholic education.

II. The Challenges of a New Generation of Researchers

Yet I think it's fair to say that the work of the early pioneers have established only an incipient field of Catholic education; or one perhaps restricted to the sociology of education; or if there is a field, one that is discernible in broad but faint outline. It now falls to a new generation of researchers to take up the study of Catholic education and to create a genuine field of study (of which I'll say more a bit later)

In truth, a lot has changed since the encouraging reports of a "Catholic school advantage" almost a generation ago, and no one should feel confident that such findings are as applicable today as they were, say, in the early 1980s when the High School and Beyond data were collected. Moreover, almost all of the findings with respect to the Catholic school advantage are of Catholic secondary schools. We know relatively little about how Catholic elementary schools are faring, but we need to know this urgently.

And the "climate of opinion" is quite different then and now. The problematic that concerns us today about Catholic schools strikingly is different from what concerned the pioneers. The pioneers simply assumed the Catholic character of the schools. The schools were unabashedly Catholic, in an unproblematic way, and what they wanted to know was whether they worked or not *as schools*. Did they provide *high quality education*? Did they foster *academic achievement*? Where they as good as

the public school down the street with respect to *student learning*? We should worry about this still---but today the backdrop to our work is not so much whether students are learning in our Catholic schools but rather: Are our Catholic schools, in fact, *Catholic enough*!

To put this differently, in the pioneer generation of research, the target of inquiry was Catholic *education*. Today, the target of inquiry is *Catholic* education. Today, some of the most important questions we can ask concerns the Catholic identity of our schools and how to strengthen it---if we could just figure out what that means.

In the remainder of my remarks I should like to take up two topics. First, I want to sketch in broad outline what seems to be required to move from an incipient field of Catholic education as bequeathed to us by pioneers like Andrew Greeley; to a field of study that is robust and interdisciplinary and takes its place in the academic landscape. Then I want to conclude by describing, again in broad outline, what some of us at Notre Dame are trying to do with respect to the "Catholic identity" question.

III. Prerequisites for a Field

A field of study is marked by "disciplined inquiry" (Shulman, 1981) by a community of scholars into a shared problematic. A field of study begins with a problem, or sets of related problems. The emergence and articulation of fields-of-study depends on *questions*. A field arises as a community of practice to address pressing issues and problems. It emerges as an outcome to a widely shared agenda of research and is, in this sense, a dependent variable not an independent variable. As any pastor will tell you, a sense of community cannot be legislated in a parish; it can only emerge as a consequence of collective action on a common goal. So it is in the community of researchers who constitute a field of study.

And there are plenty of questions to go around. In a moment I'm going to address the question of Catholic identity, but questions abound concerning models of Catholic school governance, finance, educational leadership, teacher formation, and curriculum. The new field of Catholic

education will require all hands on deck and not just the sociologists of education who have heretofore carried a disproportionate share of the load.

What else do fields of study require, in addition to problems-and-questions? It needs theoretical models. It needs a conceptual language to orient investigation. As D.C. Phillips (1996) noted, how we understand problems are influenced by our recourse to analogies, metaphors and models of the phenomena under study. The Catholic tradition offers numerous analogies, metaphors and models to structure our understanding of the “value added” by Catholic schools, including, I would argue---notions of church, Trinity, community, vocation, beatitudes, among others, and these may well be useful for helping us frame specific research questions concerning the mechanisms of Catholic school effectiveness---if we can find ways to instantiate them into practice.

But discipline inquiry goes nowhere without extensive institutional support. Funding is required to sustain significant research and to train the next generation of scholars. Let me give you an example. In the 1960s and early 70s, there was no field of moral education, but today there is. There are professional organizations and a journal. There are handbooks and edited volumes. There is an AERA SIG wherein I am active, and I sit on the executive board of an international Association for Moral Education, whose annual conference is coming to Notre Dame next November.

These are the indicators of a maturing field—but how did this come about? How do you go from *not* have a field to *having one*? The reason there is such a field today is threefold: First, there was a research team at Harvard who asked the first set of big questions---they had a good idea and they ran with it. They were armed with a powerful theoretical framework that generated the metaphors, constructs, and methods that seemed up to the task. Second, this research program was so compelling that it attracted a coterie of talented students to go there to seek advanced research training; to work on problems, to conduct and publish research. These students then went off to seed other research programs at other universities when they obtained their doctorates. Hence a critical mass of scholars was emerging into a community of practice around a shared problematic. Third, several foundations, recognizing the importance of the

questions and the urgency of the answers stepped forward with significant monies to sustain their work. So, a field needs big ideas. It needs a critical mass of researchers to pursue them; including training programs to seed the field with competently trained researchers. It needs financial support to sustain the work.

Finally, the field of study must gain legitimacy. Fields of study gain legitimacy to the extent that they conform to standard notions of academic credibility, including formal structures to encourage engagement, criticism, peer review and publication. Without this our work comes down to special pleading and hand-waving.

IV. The Catholic Identity Question

I want to conclude with some thoughts on how a number of us at Notre Dame –Darcia Narvaez, Clark Power, Anthony Holter, some colleagues in ACE Fellowship, and others, are attempting to address the foundational question concerning the Catholic identity of schools.

In their Final Report, *Making God Known, Loved, and Served: The Future of Catholic Primary and Secondary Schools in the United States*, the Notre Dame Task Force on Catholic Education urges the building of a “field of Catholic education” through studying how child development is nurtured in a “climate where faith is taken seriously.” This is one of the most important sentences in the entire Task Force, for it seems to point to the big idea, the audacious bold project than is prerequisite for a field of study: Here’s the injunction again: *Study child development in a climate where faith is taken seriously*. This bears reflection!

This injunction bids us to bring together two rather disparate things: the literatures of developmental science and the theological claims of the Catholic faith. Where these domains intersect, where child development intersects with Christian faith---there we will find clues to the Catholic identity of schools; there we will find a research program worthy of a field of study.

To that end, we have attempted to articulate a Conceptual Framework for Catholic education that has two features: 1) It is grounded in the rich resources of the Catholic tradition; and 2) It is anchored in the scholarly literatures of developmental and educational science. We have called this the “Agape School” model of Catholic education

V. The Agape School Model of Catholic Education

Our deliberation began with a set of related questions. What would instructional practice look like if it was guided by the Catholic Catechism? Does the lived experience of the Christian faith, as articulated in Scripture and Catholic tradition, suggest a range of pedagogies appropriate for distinctly Catholic education? And would the “distinctly Catholic pedagogy” align with professionally responsible instructional practices as underwritten by the knowledge base of developmental and educational science?

Catholic Identity

Our framework understands the Catholic identity of schools in a double sense. First, schools are distinctly Catholic given the centrality of its liturgy and catechesis. But, as the Parable of the Sower has taught us-- liturgy and catechesis, without the sustaining experience of community, is like the sower who spreads seed on poor soil. So, Catholic identity requires a second feature: Schools are Catholic in a broader sense with respect to the way that moral formation is promoted in the communal life of the classroom and school.

Indeed, the Congregation for Catholic Education (1988) noted that the Catholic School culture should foster a “uniquely Christian climate” that emphasizes Gospel values lived out in community. In emphasizing the communal environment of Catholic schools, the Congregation both described a reality and proclaimed an ideal for Catholic Education.

Hence the religious identity of Catholic schools “adds value” to secular versions of moral character education by its vision of *faith community* as the basis of learning and by its *Trinitarian* understanding of

the relational basis of personal identity. Moreover, in addition to “Trinity” and “community” the Catholic tradition holds out a suite of regulative concepts that articulate what a distinctly Christian life might look like: concepts such as *sacrament, vocation, forgiveness, beatitudes, and agape*, among others. These themes are foundational to the Catholic identity of schools, and efforts to realize them in the daily life of classrooms are the challenge that confronts us.

Developmental and Educational Science

In sum, the Catholic identity of schools, in our view, is marked by classroom experiences that are *Trinitarian, agapic, sacramental, vocational, communal, and beatific*. These are rich theological concepts that will never be--and can never be--reduced to the categories of mere social science. That would be to commit a crude category mistake. But it is our contention, that if our faith is true, then these concepts nonetheless must live and breathe and do their work in our lived experience. They must cash-out in some functional way that matters to us.

Fortunately, this explicitly religious framework finds resonance in scholarly research on the importance of school climate, the sense of community and other relational, affective features of the school experience. Indeed, literatures attest to the importance of caring classrooms, a sense of attachment to teachers and schools, and the perception of classrooms and schools as communities as variables critical to important educational outcomes, including student learning and academic achievement, school persistence, social-emotional competence and positive youth development.

For example, one of the most important factors in promoting moral and achievement outcomes is the school climate. Caring school climates encourage social and emotional bonding and promote positive interpersonal experiences, providing the minimum necessary grounding for the formation of character. Research by the Developmental Studies Center provides compelling evidence that the sense of classroom and school community is positively related to self-reported concern for others, conflict resolution skills, altruistic behavior, intrinsic prosocial motivation and trust in and respect for others. *Here is the “value-added” of Catholic schools.*

In addition to its socio-moral implications, the quality of affective and relational experiences also influences a broader set of educational outcomes. For example, research has shown that when students perceive their school climate positively, they develop a strong sense of belonging and school bonding. Students who perceive their teachers and peers as socially and emotionally supportive also report greater academic motivation and a positive self-concept. Support from teachers and peers, embedded in a positive classroom climate, appears to create a strong sense of school membership that encourages educational persistence and reduces behavioral misconduct. *Here is the value-added of Catholic schools.*

School climate and the sense of community, then, are crucial variables for understanding the academic and socio-moral aspects of education. What's more the Catholic tradition has resources that converge with the best insights of developmental and educational science. This is what "*studying child development in a climate of faith looks like.*" For example, the Trinitarian conception of God and the nature of church provide robust metaphors of community that align with psychological literatures on communal classroom and school organization. The distinctly Christian understanding of agapic love and the Catholic commitment to the *sacramental principle* underscores a unique vision of caring classrooms, school bonding and attachment to teacher, classroom and school community.

But the Catholic identity of schools *is also countercultural*. It attempts to instantiate the moral vision preached as the Sermon on the Mount. It is a moral vision animated by the Beatitudes. We ask ourselves, what would school life be like, for example, if its moral vision focused on the poor, the meek, the marginalized, the forgotten, and the neglected?

For one thing, we think the beatitudes qualify secular markers of achievement and success. Although Catholic education should promote and celebrate excellence in all human endeavors, Catholic education should resist the kind of social comparison that defines excellence solely in terms of winning and outperforming others. The beatitudes celebrate the dignity

of the "losers" in society, in the classroom, and in the playground, those children who struggle with their schoolwork, who are unpopular, whose lives are often out of control. One might hope that the cross, not the trophy case or the honor roll will be the most visible symbol in the Catholic School and that awards ceremonies and rewards should find ways to lift up everyone in the community, insofar as everyone is part of the community and makes it one possible. Let us celebrate, in other words, all the little resurrections in the lives of our students.

Moreover, the beatitudes might suggest an approach to discipline that emphasizes mercy, mutual encouragement and restoration to the community. It calls Catholic education to solidarity with the poor, not only those who lack financial resources, but those who also lack the "social capital" needed to excel in school. Catholic schools ideally take the Church's "preferential option for the poor" seriously in what and how it teaches, and is known for their service in their communities. Indeed, Father Greeley's research has documented long ago the Catholic schools preferential option for the poor; and while just about everybody does service learning and community service, Catholic schools got this right a long time ago in the service of its religious vision of the moral life. In this way the field of Catholic education plays a prophetic role to the field of education more generally.

But the Catholic identity of schools is not simply a religious gloss on what is known about effective school organization and instructional practice from the scholarly literatures. Rather, a Catholic identity rigorously grounded on core assumptions of the Christian faith presents also *countercultural* visions of how we are to relate to each other and to the community; of what matters in discipline, and more. Herein are promising avenues of integrative research in building the field of Catholic education.

VI. Conclusion

We have staked out for ourselves a three-fold research plan for the near term. First, we are attempting to finish a document that makes the conceptual case for an "Agape School" approach to Catholic identity; a document that shows just how "child development can be studied in a

climate where faith is taken seriously.” Second, we want to begin the hard task of developing assessments of the key themes of Catholic identity, so that these might be used by diocesan schools as a formative benchmark of *Catholic* education. We will use willing members of ACE Fellowship in writing items. Third, we will chart a national research program, ideally with significant foundation support, to chart the value-added consequences of Catholic identity for the moral formation of students and for their academic achievement.

I had occasion to mention the Parable of the Sower in my remarks. I would like stay with the horticultural theme, and conclude with a meditation on my favorite parable, the Parable of the Mustard Seed.

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds. But when it has grown, it is the biggest shrub of all and becomes a tree so that the birds of the air come and shelter in its branches.” (MT; 13: 31-32)

So it seems for the field of Catholic education. Our beginnings must seem like small mustard seeds, sown by pioneers like Andrew Greeley and James Coleman, by Tony Bryk, Maureen Hallinan, and others; and yet I am confident ---it is my prayer---that with the good soil afforded by our commitment, Catholic education will grow the size of mustard trees; so that the birds of the air—the children in our communities—come and shelter in its branches. Amen.

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