

Mann, William. Annotation of "Perceptions Regarding the Identity and Culture of a Lasallian Catholic Secondary School in Australia." by Adrian Watson, FSC, Ed.D. diss., University of San Francisco, 2011. *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 4, no. 2 (Institute for Lasallian Studies at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota: 2013).

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ANNOTATION

Watson, Adrian. "Perceptions Regarding the Identity and Culture of a Lasallian Catholic Secondary School in Australia." Ed.D. dissertation, University of San Francisco, 2011, 261 pp.

In this doctoral dissertation, Adrian Watson presents a qualitative case study of the internal perceptions of Lasallian Catholic identity and culture in one Australian secondary school (3, 11, 23). His methodology included research interviews of three administrators and twelve teachers (97, 196), observation of school events, and analysis of school documents (3, 83, 94, 197). The author acknowledges that his being a De La Salle Brother could have influenced the objectivity of analysis, interpretation of data, and interaction with interviewees (24-25). He believes that the Lasallian tradition "offers teachers a spirituality and philosophy that will enhance their effectiveness as administrators and teachers" (96).

The humanistic characteristics of Lasallian Catholic education are, he notes, generally recognized as operative in the school (135-148, 191-192, 200, 207): respectful and positive teacher-student relationships, a comprehensive academic program, high standards, a well-run school, social justice outreach programs, a commendable pastoral care program, and an affinity with the poor. However, Watson observes that the faculty made no reference to the salvific mission of Lasallian Catholic education and its evangelical role (190, 198-200, 206). The element of Lasallian spirituality was not raised by the interviewees (148) and mention of God was noticeably absent (149, 198). Most teachers in the study "emphasized the human dimension of education of Lasallian schools with little or no overt recognition of the Christian dimension" (117).

Furthermore, the school was perceived by faculty as more Lasallian than Catholic (195, 207) since, in their perception, Lasallian is viewed as more inclusive of both "non-practicing Catholic" faculty and non-Catholic teachers (148, 198). This perspective is similar to that suggested in other research in Australia showing that some teachers in Catholic schools reported that they "identified more with the religious order of the school (the sponsoring Congregation) than with it being a Catholic school" (77, 208).

Numerous things, it is noted, contribute to preventing Catholic culture from being fully realized (208-209): teachers who do not adequately understand Lasallian Catholic education (52-53), teachers and families less and less tied to the local church (2, 28, 81, 209), an increasing heterogeneity of belief (28, 49, 50, 78, 124), and a growing divergence between what parents and students want from schools and the Lasallian Catholic educational mission (51-52, 125, 204, 209). The background and attitudes of young teachers, significant numbers of whom are described increasingly as "cultural Catholics" (75-76), is also discussed.

Watson considers the relationship between the spirituality of the individual teacher and the salience of school identity to their role (72), noting that "the more developed teachers were

spiritually, the greater was their contribution to the Catholic identity and culture of their schools” (73) and their engagement with the ecclesial identity of the school (74). This is a research position, however, critiqued by some as failing to reflect the larger transformational themes of Catholic identity and assuming that Catholic schools are mono-cultural (73).

Emerging from the author's analysis of data is the fact that the majority of teachers were unable to distinguish between the characteristics of a Catholic school, in general, and the particularity of the specific school under consideration (99). The principal of the school noted, “that it is very difficult to run a Catholic school if you do not have (faculty) that have some background and training within Catholic studies of one form or another” (101). Yet, three sources or means by which teachers and administrators do gain additional knowledge about the identity and culture of Lasallian and Catholic schools are highlighted: experience, instruction, and interaction with De La Salle Brothers and committed lay Lasallians (108, 118-119).

Experience, it is noted, comes from a variety of sources: family upbringing, Catholic school attendance, prior employment in another Catholic school, and visits to other similar schools (109, 119). Participation of teachers and administrators in Lasallian professional development programs and strong links and significant interaction within the Lasallian educational network (188, 195, 205) also have proven to be particularly good avenues of instruction that enhance understanding of Lasallian identity and culture. In addition, teachers and administrators at the school being studied found Lasallian publication resources helpful in this regard, describing them as “more relevant to the everyday life and practice of teachers” than other Catholic publications (122, 207).

An overall impression of Watson's was that “most (interview) participants had not really considered how the challenges to Catholic identity and culture could be overcome” (180). However, more serious thought had obviously been given to consideration of the challenges to Lasallian identity and culture. In addition to the above mentioned challenges, two others emerged: the loss by attrition to other schools of good Lasallian lay leaders if something is not done to hold onto and promote talented lay Lasallians within the network (182-183), and the risk of stagnation if identity and culture are not explicitly and intentionally developed (183, 205).

The author concludes the dissertation by proposing a few avenues for further study and research (211-212): a similar study of other Lasallian Catholic schools in Australia and around the world, a qualitative study of the beliefs and practices of administrators and teachers in Lasallian Catholic schools and how these influence the identity and culture of a school, and a research study of the differences and similarities of identity and culture among and between non-government and Catholic secondary schools in Australia.