

The Transformative Nature of Lasallian Research

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In his essay on *Lasallian Research and Higher Education*, Brother Gerard Rummery (2006) wrote, "I wish to propose that we should be looking for *the values* behind some of the traditional Lasallian practices developed originally for the French primary schools...rather than any attempt to replicate the practices themselves, perhaps with some idea that an underlying uniformity can be maintained."² The story I will be telling you is about a present-day network of schools that the Lasallians who founded them believe are aligned with the values that De La Salle espoused so many years ago. This evening I will talk with you about my research at the Catalyst Schools in Chicago and the impact that the research has had on the Catalyst Schools themselves, the two doctoral students who were co-researchers, and on me, the principal investigator.

This story begins with the San Miguel schools – tuition-free, Catholic schools inspired by the Lasallian mission – to serve the poor. Based on the success of the San Miguel schools in impoverished neighborhoods in Chicago, the CEO of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) asked the Christian Brother leaders to consider opening a charter school in the city. The superintendent was met with an emphatic NO. The Brothers said, "We are closely aligned with our Catholic tradition... We would have to compromise who we are and what we do..."³

Over a three-year period, however, the Brothers had a change of heart, and they chose to open a Lasallian-inspired public charter school. Their decision was influenced by the difficulties of raising funds for the San Miguel schools, the overall declining Catholic school enrollment especially in urban areas, and concern about the underperforming public schools in Chicago. Their goal was to "infuse the public schools with the ethos of the Catholic educational system" (Fehrenbach & Siderewicz, 2012, p. 5).⁴ As you can imagine, I am giving you the Readers' Digest version of this story. This was a very difficult decision for the Brothers – not nearly as trouble-free as I have just described. In fact, it was a decision that surfaced conflict and controversy within the Brothers' community. Nevertheless, in the end, the Brothers started the first Lasallian-inspired public charter school in the United States.

Two of the Catalyst Schools are examples of what is increasingly being called "religious charter schools".⁵ Though not technically religious schools, they typically integrate many of the values and pedagogical approaches as found in faith-based schools, are often housed in former religious schools, and offer wraparound religious educational programming. Religious charter schools generally have a social and/or cultural orientation that infuses the school's mission, curriculum, and extracurricular activities. The most salient difference between parochial and religious charter schools is the absence of religious instruction taught to the students. Even so, there are prominent charter schools in the United States that serve Muslims, Jews, Christians, Greek Orthodox, Hmong, and other groups.

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While conducting the literature review for this research, we were surprised by what we found. For example, we knew that charter schools could not teach religion from a particular religious perspective or require religious affiliation for staff hiring or student admissions. However, they can accommodate a student's religious beliefs, provide a space for students to pray, and require religion courses in the curriculum – if no particular religion is sanctioned. Further, these public schools can arrange their schedules to accommodate voluntary afternoon religious instruction, can close for religious holidays, and serve religiously required food as an accommodation to students. Finally, though in general, religious icons are not permitted in public charter schools, they can rent space or purchase a building with religious icons in view.

Many Catholic dioceses are turning to start public charter schools when other choices are limited. This trend – though quite controversial – is increasingly occurring in urban centers. Among the most prominent examples include Washington, D.C., which started seven charter schools in 2008 and the Dioceses of Miami, which open eight public charters in 2009 – enrolling many of the same students who attended the Catholic schools and housing the schools in Catholic facilities. Additionally the revenue from the rent has provided an additional source of revenue for the financially strapped urban parishes.

The first Catalyst School, however, was different from the model I just described. Howland Elementary, a K – 8 school, opened in 2006. It is located in a former Chicago Public School building in a neighborhood described as a community of deep poverty. Community members were initially quite hostile when this new school opened, thinking this was an attempt to gentrify the neighborhood and drive the existing residents out. In 2007, the second K – 8 school (Circle Rock) opened in a former Christian school, which had closed due to declining enrollments. It is adjacent to an evangelical church, and the transition was much smoother there. Like other religious charter schools, the church provides wrap-around services for students, which include voluntary faith-based programs and social services.

Catalyst Maria opened in 2012 in a former all girls' Catholic school that could no longer sustain its enrollments. This K – 12 school is a collaboration between the Catalyst Network and the Sisters of St. Casimir who operated Maria High School for 101 years. Catalyst Maria represents the epitome of the religious charter school. The site has a Catholic Center that provides after school programming and community faith formation for students, parents, and community members – on a voluntary basis. The facility is enormously impressive, with an expansive auditorium, gymnasium, and lots of religious statuary in the building and on the grounds. The school, however, is located in a community with the highest number of foreclosures in Chicago in the midst of rampant gang violence – thus explaining the declining enrollments in Maria High School.

The students in the Catalyst Schools are similar to those from the San Miguel schools in that 95% live in poverty, 99% are students of color, and their neighborhoods are characterized by violence, homelessness, and mental illness. Given this population, the Catalyst Schools are founded on the belief that every child possesses inherent value and potential, regardless of background, educational level, or life circumstances. The schools have identified four key values – Results, Rigor, Relationships, and Hope – to help the students achieve their ambitious goals. Similar to Lasallian-based schools, there is a strong emphasis on achieving *results* within a

culture of *rigor*. Without *relationships*, it is difficult to achieve either results or rigor especially given the student population. We saw evidence of relationship building throughout our observations. For example, we watched the principal at Circle Rock shake each child's hand and greet him or her by name, starting at 7:30 in the morning. This is no easy task as there are over 500 students at that school. The teachers replicated this process as the students entered their morning classrooms. Combining results, rigor, and relationships creates an academic environment that brings *hope* to the students, their families, and the community. A long-term community member and Catalyst employee expressed the reach of hope.

Starting the school here [offers] a sense of hope and I say that for the black community, now we have a place that provides a great education. When the Christian Brothers embraced this community, I don't even think that they saw this coming ...how this school is transforming this community... Right here on this corner there is sacredness for this community.

Let me quickly tell you about what goes on in the Catalyst Schools. Like in many urban charter schools, the students have a longer school day and school year, and in keeping with Catalyst's philosophy of showing respect for all students, they are called scholars. There are many extra activities such as dance, choir, orchestra, gardening, and sports, helping to broaden the students' horizons. There is a strong emphasis, like all Lasallian schools, on creating a safe place for children to learn with a focus on discipline, structure, academics, and yes - standardized testing – in fact, more than what Chicago Public Schools. Given the enormous needs of the students, there is also a great deal of individualized instruction, tutoring, and graduate support, preparing students to go to the next level of their education.

Here is a snapshot of one source of data that suggests that the Catalyst Schools are making a difference in Chicago. For the two K – 8 schools that have been in existence longer, 99% of the graduates are now on target to graduate from high school. In the Howland neighborhood, the number of students expected to graduate is 39% of the students; Circle Rock is 49%; and the Maria neighborhood is 50%. For the Chicago Public Schools as a whole (which includes all public schools including the most elite), the percentage of students enrolled in high school who graduate is 63%.

Now a word about me and why I was interested in this research. I grew up in Lynchburg, VA – a very conservative city in central Virginia. When I was 17, I participated in what was called an intentional community, living in the inner city of San Antonio, Texas with a Methodist pastor, his family, and seven other students from throughout the country. I worked with Mexican children and adolescent girls in extremely poor neighborhoods. I could easily say that during that summer in San Antonio, it was as if I were living in a foreign country – the climate, the language, the architecture, and the experiences that the children and adolescents had to live through on a daily basis were all foreign to me. And it was during that summer that my social consciousness was born, leading me to a career as a social worker, social work administrator, and trainer for social workers, and adult educator. I later earned my doctorate in psychology with a focus on organizational psychology and ultimately landed at Saint Mary's College, where the Lasallian mission became second nature to me – though I had never heard of it before I came to the College.

When the opportunity arose for me to conduct research with the Catalyst Schools, I was drawn to work in the communities where the schools are located, given my social work sensibilities, and I was fascinated, as an organizational psychologist to see what would happen when two distinct and contrasting cultures were merged in a Lasallian-inspired – not Lasallian-based – charter school. I worked closely with the Director for Mission Effectiveness to identify the research questions and the data collection processes. The two research questions for the study were:

1. What are the challenges faced and lessons learned when moving the Lasallian approach of education into the public sector?
2. To what extent is it possible to transfer the Catholic ethos into a public school setting?

On the research team, I served as the principal investigator; I teach in the doctorate of educational leadership at Saint Mary's College. Two doctoral students with very different life experiences and skills worked with me on the project. We made two trips to Chicago and interviewed a cross section of employees – a total of 40 individuals including the three founders. We also observed 20 classes in the schools, toured the buildings, and read numerous documents that translated De La Salle's writing into language appropriate for a values-based –rather than Christ-based – education.

We identified seven themes after a complex process of analyzing the data from the forty interviews, observations and document review. They were:

- Mission is key
- Leadership: The Companion to Mission
- The Paradox of Structure
- Balance is Needed
- Partnerships are Critical
- The Specter of CPS
- Hope for the Children

Rather than discussing all seven, I will focus on two: Mission is Key and the Specter of Chicago Public Schools. I will gladly share the article, which will appear in a forthcoming issue of *The Journal of Catholic Education* with anyone interested. The article gives a full account of the research, a detailed description of each theme, and our conclusions and recommendations.

Mission is Key.

It was evident from our research that the Catalyst employees were very committed – some passionately so – to the mission of educating the poor. And they knew the basics of the written mission statement such as the schools are college preparatory schools, the staff support students through high school and beyond, parental involvement is emphasized, and the development of the whole child is stressed. But they were less clear about the Lasallian mission of the schools. In fact, about one half of those interviewed did not really understand how the Lasallian mission played out in a public school. One of the founders offered insight into why this might be:

“There was a paranoia from the start – a fear that we were going to end up in court on this...that there would be all types of challenges from either the teachers union or the ACLU, but in the end, I think those were just fears.”

Addressing the staff members’ lack of knowledge about the Lasallian mission, we wrote in our report to the Catalyst community,

Throughout the interviews, it was clear that the employees in the Catalyst Schools believe they are engaged in meaningful – even transformational – work. They feel proud of the schools and believe the student achievements are directly related to the Catalyst approach to education. With that said, many also believe that the schools could be more effective *by tapping into the Lasallian heritage and mission more intentionally.*

Before moving on to a discussion about the theme addressing the specter of the Chicago Public Schools, let me set a context about working in a public charter school in inner city Chicago. One of the Catalyst Network administrators said in his interview: “It is an incredibly difficult environment in which to work...frankly, why anyone would want to do it is beyond me. Remember we cannot pay what they are worth. Incredibly long hours with incredibly stressful conditions, and yet, they do it every day and are absolutely committed to it and have remarkable success.”

Another participant who is in an academic leadership role in one of the schools, declared:

What you see every day and what you have to interact with every day is kind of like being on the frontlines of war, but you don’t get a break ... There is extreme poverty, extreme issues in the community, extreme violence... it wears on your ability to cope – you become desensitized to it...I love these children and this staff, but you are just on the frontlines sometimes...and after a while, you just sort of flake out.

Working in any urban school, as described above, is demanding, but transitioning from a private Catholic school to a public charter school adds additional levels of challenge. Even so, there was unanimous agreement that the decision to open Lasallian-inspired charter schools was the right one. According to those we interviewed, the Catalyst Schools, unlike the San Miguel schools, are able to provide high quality education to *large* numbers of students – ultimately to over 2000. With that said, they identified the numerous costs involved in this decision which include:

- The pressure of high stakes testing is quite real. Charter Schools are under greater pressure than district public schools to achieve their goals as outlined in their charters. For example, Howland and Circle Rock are both on Chicago Public School’s Warning List, given the students’ scores on standardized tests, and if the test scores do not improve, the schools could be closed;
- There are voluminous compliance requirements that require extensive paperwork and numerous hours preparing the paperwork;

- There is extreme frustration with the way CPS handles budgeting and finances. The Catalyst Schools get less per student than the CPS schools, yet it is expensive to run a school where social workers are needed, directors of mission and discipline are required, and other staff persons are hired so the students can reach their potential; and
- There is the perception that CPS's culture has a negative effect on the Catalyst culture.

Related to the last item, one individual who spoke for many said, "We have been too ready to adopt the culture of public schools because of the relationship with CPS, because of the compliance issues, because of standardized testing and how that is used to judge schools."

In our concluding report, we addressed the challenge of operating Lasallian-inspired schools within the public school culture. We wrote,

It is difficult to adhere to the Lasallian charism when results based on standardized testing become the yardstick by which the schools are measured. The public school culture is powerful – we could say insidious - and it can incrementally and systematically overtake the culture of a faith-inspired institution. Without *intentional and ongoing attention* given to the founding mission of Catalyst, it is possible that a Catalyst School could slowly evolve into a school that looks very similar to a district-run public school.

In the eyes of many, it is *not* okay to become another CPS school. One young woman passionately spoke about why this is so. "Our mission is so much greater because literally I feel like our work can be the difference between the life and death of some students. It's too important to be taken lightly or to trivialize by saying, 'Our goal is to get kids in college.' No, we need to change the world."

So you may wonder, is it possible to transfer the Catholic ethos into public schools? The Catholic Institute of Education has identified 13 features of Catholic schools. They include such items as:

- Everyone is welcome. No one is excluded.
- It has a strong value system based on Gospel values with Christ as the center of the school.
- It is a faith community that fosters positive relationships among learners, teachers, and parents.
- Everyone has the right to be treated with dignity and must treat others the same.
- The Catholic school resists individualism. It is concerned about justice and the well-being of the whole community – we are our sisters' and brothers' keepers.

Clearly there are many similarities between the Catholic and Catalyst Schools. In fact, if the wording on the list were slightly altered, each of the items with one exception applies to the Catalyst Schools. The noticeable exception is "the religious atmosphere fosters the formation of the whole child. *Worship and prayer are integral and central to school life.*" In the Catalyst schools, the development of the whole child is focused on character development by instilling values such as fostering trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship.

As was noted by one of the Catalyst founders, these values can be seen as biblical values, but “they are also commonly held human and social values and offer a public school a vehicle for helping parents and guardians shape the character of their child without an appeal to denominational religion or a specific faith tradition”.⁶

In our report, we noted the remarkable strides that the schools made in transferring the Catholic ethos into the public school setting. But we also pointed out that the primary focus on testing, which is mandated by CPS, ultimately undermines some of the most cherished Catholic educational goals, most especially the focus on the child’s spiritual development. We concluded that to date, the schools have not yet identified how to both increase the students’ academic achievement as measured by standardized testing and focus on the students’ spiritual development, a key component of the Catholic ethos.

After preparing our report, we sent it off, wondering a bit about how it would be received. Imagine our excitement when we received this e-mail from one of the Catalyst School founders:

First off, I want to thank you and the team. Your work is an invaluable gift, and is the clearest reflection yet of where we are today relative to our founding vision. It is also a serious work! I find it very well balanced, affirming and, yet, challenging... Catalyst is embarking upon an ambitious effort to map our entire curriculum and to articulate our Lasallian mission! Your research will be a cornerstone which will serve to help us better articulate our mission.

So often our research gets published in journals but does not necessarily make a difference. We were quite pleased to hear about the changes at Catalyst that addressed our recommendation to more intentionally focus on the Lasallian mission such as:

- The Catalyst Network has created a Mission Committee, which has established Mission Effective Standards. For example, one of the standards is “The schools are animated by faith and zeal.” This is operationalized, in part, by the following, “The spirit of faith kindles in Catalyst teachers and staff an ardent zeal for those confided to their care in order to open minds and hearts to life, to love, and to knowledge.” Clearly this statement sounds more like one created by Catholic school educators than by those working in district public schools.
- They have created a stronger focus on integrating De La Salle’s story in orientation sessions, professional development, and the Catalyst Leadership Summit. One new employee wrote on her blog: “St. John Baptist De La Salle, patron saint of all who work in the field of education. Did you know that we had a patron saint? I didn’t. I was pleasantly surprised when I attended an orientation meeting for my new job and learned a very important history lesson.” She went on to identify how she as the Director of Technology – not a principal or teacher but as the Director of Technology – is living the Lasallian mission.
- The Network is launching a national movement to create faith-inspired public charter schools in the inner cities, using our report to help them chart the way.
- In part inspired by our research, Br. Michael Fehrenbach is writing a book on what faith-inspired means and how a public school can be Lasallian.

In addition to the schools making changes, this research, according to the students, was transformational for them. There were two students who worked on this project. They conducted interviews, observed classes, reviewed relevant literature, participated in the analysis, and helped write the final report. The first student is a Senior Associate Vice Provost at Stanford University. She grew up in Chicago but not in the neighborhoods we visited. She has emphasized to me how participating in this study helped her know how to conduct her dissertation, which was also a qualitative study. On a personal level, she was also touched by this research. I will never forget how she looked when she came out of an interview with a social worker who told her that children who are five or six years old know about sex and can name drugs that the social worker never heard of.

The second student is very familiar with the violence in impoverished neighborhoods. She founded an organization in East Palo Alto called Live in Peace, which “exists to advance a culture of non-violence, healing and power.” She became tired of seeing young black and brown men killed in her neighborhood, and she helped start this non-profit organization. When asked to join in the research, she jumped at the chance. She later wrote me:

I just want to say thank you for including me in this project. As you know—my work creates havoc with my studies— I have wondered if this is the right place for me...but being a part of research that is powerful, insightful, and helpful on a ground level —particularly with a group of folks close to my heart – has given me clarity like nothing else could.

And now for my transformation. I came to Saint Mary’s College because of its reputation for academic quality, I was afforded an opportunity to teach adult students, the campus itself was beautiful, the College was well-established, and I desperately wanted to leave my other position. None of the reasons had anything to do with the Catholic or Lasallian nature of the College. What has emerged, however, as the constant in my work at Saint Mary’s has been my evolution as a Lasallian educator and researcher. What inspires and encourages me is my ongoing commitment to the Lasallian mission and the opportunities I have to touch my students’ lives through teaching and research. This research on the Catalyst Schools was a remarkable experience for my two doctoral students and me. It brought me closer to them, I had a role in helping the Catalyst Schools reclaim their founding mission, I reconnected with my early social justice roots, and I renewed my commitment to conduct research on Lasallian schools. Indeed this research on Lasallian-inspired schools was transformational.

Notes

1. Rebecca A. Proehl, Ph.D. chairs the Leadership Department and is Professor in the Doctorate in Educational Leadership Program, Kalmanovitz School of Education, Saint Mary’s College of California. She was recognized as the 2012 - 2013 Professor of the Year at Saint Mary’s College. Dr. Proehl was awarded the Ph.D. in Psychosocial Development and Education from The Wright Institute. She also holds the M.S.W. (Virginia Commonwealth University) and the B.A. in sociology (High Point University).

2. Gerard Rummery, "Lasallian Scholarship and Higher Education," *Reflections on Lasallian Higher Education*, ed. C. J. Franz, 160. Winona, Minnesota: Saint Mary's Press, 2006.

3. De La Salle Today, 2012, p. 20.

4. Michael Fehrenbach and Edward Siderewicz, "Catalyst: Bringing the Lasallian Charism to Public Schools," *De La Salle Today* (2012): 23.

5. Cf. B. S. Cooper and E. V. Randall, "Fear and Privatization," *Educational Policy* 22 (1), 2008; and L. D. Weinberg, "Religious Charter Schools: Gaining Ground Yet Still Undefined," *Journal of Research on Christian Schools*, 18 (3): 2009.

6. De La Salle Today, 2012, p. 22.

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