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## ANNOTATION

Orlowski, Susan Nancy. "An Exploration of Community in a Catholic High School." EdD dissertation, University of St. Thomas (MN), 1991. 158 pp.

The introduction of the study states that since the Second Vatican Council the Roman Catholic Church stressed the importance of community building especially in Catholic schools (1). The purpose of the study was to create a "thick cultural description of the phenomenon of community in Catholic high schools since the literature suggests that Catholic schools seem to exhibit a communal character more than public or other private schools" (2). The researcher noted various ways community is important in a school environment (5). The word community was defined as "a set of relationships that overlap. Its members have shared values and actively participate, in varying degrees, in an interactive network" (8). The working definition was based on work from Coleman and Hoffer (1987) as well as other researchers who studied culture and in some cases rituals and symbols involved in a specific culture. Topics such as effective schools (10), how to build community (14), culture (15), the historical perspective of community (17), intentional communities (22), and loss of and need for community (29) were highlighted.

The researcher used, a case study exploration of how "community" is lived out in a Catholic high school co-founded by the De La Salle Christian Brothers and the School Sisters of Notre Dame (31). The school was located in the Upper Midwest, established in the 1960s, and has a widespread reputation for having a strong sense of community among its members (35). Most of the administration, teachers, and staff are lay people; however, a few religious still work at the high school.

The study consisted of three phases. The first phase of data collection involved a series of unstructured interviews with students, teachers, staff, administrators, parents, and alums. The desire of this phase was to "capture the perceived shared values and the degree to which persons have experienced and/ or participated in community." (37). These thirty individuals spoke about the "culture" of the school, shared stories, names, and events that built community.

The second phase consisted of a follow-up survey of all employees (76 total individuals) and current first-year students. The survey received an 88% response rate from the employees. The survey consisted of demographic information (six questions ranging from gender to religious denomination), and eight additional "community" questions. Each of the questions had multiple Likert-scaled questions and items to place in rank order (70). The student survey was similar. Out of the 775 students attending the high school, 108 of the students (all first year students) were chosen to take the survey and successfully completed it (32). The survey consisted of three main questions with 5 – 7 Likert-scaled questions (85). The Likert scale for both instruments was a four point scale with 1 being not important to 4 being extremely important.

Lastly, the third phase was a review of the researcher's personal field notes regarding observations to augment the description of community. Over an 11 year period of time, the field

notes were from opportunities the researcher had to “experience, foster, and observe community in a variety of contexts, creating a rich opportunity for participant observation” (37). The researcher listed various professional opportunities and research previously completed to show the breadth and depth of their understanding of this specific culture (38).

A detailed “historical context” of the Catholic school was shared, including but not limited to, the early days, beginning a tradition, establishing a set of shared beliefs, and the 1970s (62). Stories from the founders, religious, and educators were collected to show the important background from which to examine the existing sense of community. The school facility, faculty/ staff, administration, and students were explained (85).

Findings from the interview, surveys, and field notes indicated many individuals found a “strong sense of community” at the high school, noted the “warm welcome” they received, stated there was something “special” about this school, faculty/ staff have a low turnover indicating “job satisfaction, dedication, ownership, and commitment” to the institution was deeply felt (98).

The summary of the case study found “three principle elements fundamental to the understanding of community: (1) a unity of purpose, (2) the celebration of roots and ideals, (3) a focus on people (123). The researcher then went on to explain each of these three findings. A unity of purpose . . . the ownership in that purpose is “an essential contributing factor in the strong sense of community that exists” (124). The celebration of roots and ideals is found to be true as an organization but also as a “conscious effort to preserve and encourage the singular nature of the school. Catholicism as articulated by the community through rites and celebrations is strong (126). “A focus on people is found within the school as a “strong emphasis on the individual and on a warm, caring environment is part of the school and an important factor is that students are recognized as individuals . . . students find a camaraderie among students and faculty/ staff” (129).

The researcher indicated the study “bears direct administrative implications for Catholic and private school educators in three areas: (1) strategic long-range planning, (2) faculty/ staff retention, and (3) development and admission efforts” (130). Potential problems with the study were noted (131). The researcher found the institution might be “ignoring a wealth of valuable data found in an institution’s ‘foundational history’ the charisms upon which an institution is founded, it is critically important to have compatible philosophies shared between the sponsoring entities in an educational merger, charismatic leadership highlights the importance of having leaders who personally and enthusiastically support the mission of the school” (131). The concern is when the story is not passed down, if competing philosophies are found, and/ or the enthusiastic/ supportive leader leaves, what occurs within the school? The researcher also asked, how are schools prepared for this type of transition?

Lastly, the researcher indicated that the study “has broad implications for any organization that wishes to create or enhance a strong sense of community” (139). This case study found intentional quality characterized by conscious planning, coordination, and commitment can assist with building a viable and flourishing sense of community. These elements were found within the small Catholic Midwest high school, and the researcher believes they can assist other organizations that desire a strong sense of community.