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How Catholic School Personnel Perceive and Explain Minority Achievement in the Catholic Setting

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Abstract:

Many educators and theorists alike, argue that while our nation's public schools are continually plagued with a racial achievement gap, Catholic schools have found a solution to this social injustice. Through interviewing Catholic school personnel to determine how they perceive and explain this achievement gap, this researcher has concluded that minority students who attend Catholic schools achieve at higher capacities than their publicly educated peers because they possess greater motivation to achieve. This motivation to achieve incorporates a higher value towards education and a higher motivation towards academic success, relative to their white peers.

The gap between minority and white achievement dominates today's educational landscape like no other issue at the federal, state, and local levels. Despite educational legislation such as, *No Child Left Behind (2001)*, which has made the improved achievement of minority students a specific criterion of school success, nationwide minority students continually underperform in comparison to their white peers on standardized tests, grade point averages and selective college admissions. However, many academics and scholars believe a sector of education where this trend of (racial) underperformance is significantly reduced, if not eliminated, is in the Catholic or parochial system.

A decade ago in 1997, Derek Neal, an economics professor at the University of Chicago, examined minority achievement in Catholic schools. Professor Neal documented that 91% of minority students who attend Catholic secondary schools graduated, compared to only 62% of minority students educated in the public sector; indicating that there may be some truth to the notion that minorities achieve at higher rates in the Catholic sector of education, (online source, pg. N/A).

Because minorities are significantly more successful in Catholic schools it is important to understand what accounts for these changes in order to achieve widespread social equality. Our society is structured in such a way that the quality of an individual's education (in addition to their achievement) typically correlates with future professional success such as higher paying, more prestigious jobs. Simply, success in education has vast socioeconomic implications. Unfortunately, public education wherein the majority of students are educated is marked by severe underachievement by minority students as

compared to their white peers. Therefore, as long as public education is characterized by this disproportionate achievement across racial backgrounds, public education will remain a system responsible for reproducing social inequality rather than eliminating it. Considering the success the Catholic sector has had eradicating minority underachievement, it is important to study the factors responsible for increased minority success in order for educators to gain insight into alleviating a social inequity which has plagued our society for decades.

Much of the existing research on the topic of minority achievement in Catholic schools is based on quantitative studies, which suggest varying degrees of heightened achievement and attribute myriad factors of Catholic education as being responsible for these heightened achievements.

Regarding minorities achieving at higher levels in Catholic schools there is some inconsistency. One such study in 1982 by researchers Keith and Page had significant implications. These researchers conducted a longitudinal study across two years examining high school achievement between minorities educated in the public and Catholic sectors. The study included 58,270 students from a combination 1,015 public and Catholic high schools. The initial findings indicated that a significant performance gap existed between minorities educated in the public versus Catholic sector; indicating the latter as experiencing greater success. However, when controls were put in place for student backgrounds, including parent education, financial background and student characteristics (skill abilities based on 15 minute exams) the resulting discoveries indicated no divide existed between minorities in Catholic and public schools; suggesting

that Catholic schools simply admit more academically inclined (minority) students, instead of incorporating a specific practice which promotes higher minority achievement.

In contrast to Keith and Pages' findings, researcher Vernon Polite conducted a study two years early with significantly different findings. In this quantitative study examining minority graduation rates of 113,000 students educated in both public and Catholic schools, Polite discovered minorities educated in Catholic schools experienced significantly higher graduation rates. Specifically, 18% of minority students educated in Catholic schools over their high school career would drop out compared to 31% educated in the public sector. Additionally, Polite discovered that the total (racially mixed) population experienced drop out rates of 21%; indicating that minorities educated in Catholic schools were significantly more likely to complete their education than the entire public system.

While many studies simply examine graduation rates and test scores as a means to determine whether or not a Catholic education has a significant difference on achievement, researcher William Sander conducted a study further examining what aspects of Catholic education account for heightened minority achievement. Building upon the existing research of Coleman & Greeley (1985), which identified several factors of Catholic education which they believed contributed to heightened minority achievement; Sander performed a quantitative analysis of survey data to determine the impact these factors had on minority achievement (1996). Sander examined theories crediting a core curriculum, more discipline, decentralization and the values that come with a Catholic education as possible aspects of Catholic education which increase minority achievement. However, Sander's findings suggest that none of these factors

have an impact on minority achievement; rather he concluded the only relevant aspect of Catholic education was the amount of homework assigned. Specifically, that the increases in the quantity of homework Catholic students were assigned was most significantly responsible for heightened minority achievement. Sander demonstrates his findings in the chart below:

Mean Hours of Homework per Week Spent on Homework:

Minority Status:	Public:	Private:
White	4.0	5.2
Minority (black and Hispanic)	3.6	5.9

These figures reveal that white students who attended Catholic schools in comparison to their publicly educated peers dedicated an extra 1.2 hours per week on homework. While minority students in Catholic schools experienced nearly twice an increase (2.3 hours) compared to their peers in public schools. These racial implications are significant. According to Sander, while increased homework had very little impact on white student achievement, minority students were significantly more dedicated to their studies in Catholic schools. As Sander argues, homework strongly correlates to achievement and since minorities are willing to dedicate more time to their studies in Catholic schools, as a result they are experience greater success.

Given the contradictory nature of these studies, regarding the extent of heightened minority achievement and the responsible factors, this project aims to determine for itself the relevant factors of Catholic education which increase minority achievement.

Due to time and scheduling limitations throughout the semester the resulting research design examines how those responsible for constructing the Catholic education

perceive and explain the reduced achievement gap in their schools. Specifically, my research question asks: *How do Catholic school personnel perceive and explain minority achievement in the Catholic setting?* Additionally, by focusing on how personnel perceive minority achievement this study differs from existing quantitative research on the topic which enables for a unique comparison to determine how personnel perceive a topic versus conclusions based upon student opinions reflected through survey data.

Although this design excludes members involved in the Catholic education process such as parents and students, by only interviewing school personnel the research remains somewhat consistent in that each respondent has a relatively similar perspective; their role involves educating students. Furthermore, excluding the two subjects from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania this researcher had no prior connections with families currently enrolling children in a Catholic school. Given the difficulty of locating adult school personnel willing to be interviewed, this researcher believed time spent locating Catholic school students and their parents would not have been an efficient allocation of time. In addition to interviewing school personnel the thought of conducting on sight observations was considered, however scheduling constraints made this impracticable. Although observations coupled with interviewing students attending Catholic school and their parents would allow for interesting comparisons between existing research and the “perspectives” conveyed by personnel, time and schedule restrictions made this unrealistic. Therefore, this research design focuses solely on the perspectives of Catholic school personnel.

Given the focus of this research are the perceptions Catholic school personnel possess regarding minority academic achievement, primary data consists of interviews

with a variety of Catholic school personnel including administrators, teachers, specialists, and paraprofessionals. By incorporating varying perspectives the researcher hoped to attain a more accurate understanding of which factors specific to Catholic education lend themselves to minority success.

Each interview consisted of two sections. To begin subjects were asked a set of questions which inquired about previously mentioned theories explaining minority achievement in Catholic schools¹. These questions inquired whether or not schools incorporated particular structures or practices which result in more homogenous achievement across racial lines. The interview questions covered topics of school structures such as untracked curriculums, additional help for struggling students, minority clubs and/or programs. Additionally, questions were posed to determine whether personnel perceived any racial variation in attitude towards achievement, abilities or skill level, discipline and attendance rates. The purpose of these secondary questions is to determine if the minority student population within these Catholic schools is representative of minority students educated in the public sector.

The second interview portion consisted of asking subjects to define the factors of Catholic education they attribute most significantly with heightened minority achievement. Note: participants were not asked their own racial background.

A total of ten 15-35 minutes phone interviews were conducted at the respondent's convenience (6 teachers, 2 principals/deans and 2 assistant administrators). Each interview has been transcribed and analyzed. All subjects are employed at all male private Catholic schools in Connecticut with the exception of two subjects in similar parochial systems in or around Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The student bodies of these

¹ See Appendix for actual interview questionnaire.

schools range from 350-1200 and each require annual tuition costs beginning at \$5,000 and upwards \$24,000², although financial aid is available for those who qualify.

Subjects were intentionally chosen from Connecticut schools to control for any demographic variables which might exist. Additionally, excluding the two Philadelphia subjects (who the researcher had prior personal relationships with) by interviewing educators in Connecticut, the subjects would presumably be familiar with Trinity College. Identifying the researcher's affiliation with Trinity College in initial inquiries regarding participation may have given respondents an increased willingness to participate.

Subjects were chosen based on the availability of contact information. The national Archdiocese operates a website which includes links for every recognized Catholic school in Connecticut. This researcher then visited the websites of each individual school and in the case that faculty contact information (email address) was made available, each subject would receive an electronically message (email) requesting their participation. Those who responded indicating their willingness to participate received follow up messages with contact information necessary to arrange an interview at their convenience.

The perceptions expressed by the subjects in this study both support and challenge numerous theories which attempt to understand why the Catholic educational environment is one conducive to reducing the achievement gap between white students and their minority classmates. Specific responses addressed both structures and programs which they described from their settings, but more importantly, personnel spoke of

² These figures are representative of 9/10 schools. Figures for the remaining school could not be determined.

minority achievement motivation as the decisive factor specific to Catholic schooling to which they attributed minority success.

Several respondents emphasized the importance of the school providing a structured system to monitor and support students early in their careers. One example of this was having members of the National Honor Society provide weekly tutoring for any students struggling in their classes. Also, weekly meetings with guidance counselors proved important for many students who needed support in learning to self advocate.

Additionally, respondents highlighted aspects of Catholic schools inherent to all male private schools. Specifically, (which incidentally was the topic of her dissertation) that boys benefit academically when educated in all male classrooms. Also, that Catholic schools are able to attract many qualified students and have the ability to only accept the brightest and therefore those most likely to achieve comparable to their white classmates.

Although these aspects of Catholic education seem logical and most likely play a role in increasing the performance of minority students, these were not the underlying theme of Catholic education that personnel attributed minority success. Instead, personnel conveyed the aspect of the minority achievement motivation. Specifically, personnel repeatedly mentioned the value minorities place on their situation and the motivation they possess to achieve. These themes were present throughout each interview and reiterated in my final question directly inquiring about what factor(s) of Catholic schools personnel most significantly attribute to heightened minority achievement.

One aspect of minority achievement motivation incorporates the value that minorities place on their education and more importantly on their situation at a particular

school. One observation conveyed by the Dean at Woodridge Prep³ is from his experiences many of the minority students who attend Woodbridge come from limited financial means. Despite that many of these minority students receive financial aid of some sort; each family is required to pay a minimum percent of the tuition⁴. For many minority students even this reduced tuition is a substantial sum of money for their family. This dean argued that the effect on minority students witnessing their family make tremendous financial sacrifices (in tuition costs) for their education caused them to understand the importance of a good education. Since public education is of no additional charge minority students better understand the importance of a good education since their family is willing to pay large sums of money to send them to a Catholic school. This understanding of the importance of a good education, in this dean's opinion, encouraged minority students to truly apply and push themselves academically.

Interesting about this phenomenon is that this dean's observation regarding tuition costs did not have the same effect on white students. Although white students pay significant sums of money (frequently more than minority students of whom a higher percentage receive financial aid), because white students typically come from more financially secure backgrounds tuition costs are a significantly smaller percentage of their families income. Therefore, these white students do not necessarily view tuition as a financial sacrifice because in many cases paying for tuition does not prevent them from owning a car or their family taking fancy vacations. As a result white students not feel as "privileged" to be where they are, which is reflected in their lesser attitudes towards achievement.

³ Pseudonym

⁴ Exact figure was not specified.

Similarly, along the lines of valuing their situation, one high school teacher indicated “...minority students are more appreciative of their opportunity...” Based on this high school teachers experiences, he conveyed many minority students who attend higher grade levels of secondary school often transfer into the Catholic sector from troubled inner city schools. This teacher believed this gave minority students a unique perspective that many of their wealthier white classmates did not possess. This perspective was the result of the poor quality of the inner city schools from which these minorities typically transfer from. In many cases, these inner city schools face significant behavioral issues among its student body, a lack of adequate resources, facilities and quality teachers which ultimately prevents quality instruction. According to this teacher, having experienced these “troubled” inner city schools, many minority students do not wish to return and will push themselves academically to ensure they maintain the necessary grade point average in order to be allowed to return the following year. As a result, many minority students seek encouragement by not wishing to return to their previous schools, which in many cases motivates them to put forth the necessary efforts for success.

This scenario is similar to Jonathan Ogbu’s dual frame of reference theory, which correlates perspective with achievement. Ogbu’s attempts to explain the achievement gap by distinguishing perspectives between voluntary and involuntary minorities. Ogbu cities voluntary minorities as individuals who immigrate to this country (on their own accord), view this country as a land of opportunity and therefore put forth the necessary commitment to receive high academic marks. Conversely, involuntary minorities are decedents of individuals brought to this country against their will (most notably slaves)

and view this land as a place of discrimination. These individuals believe despite their efforts (including educational success) there are structures in place which will prevent them from every achieving professional success. Therefore, these individuals do not put forth convincing academic efforts and thus an achievement gap results. This theory is relevant in that it focuses on varying perspectives in correlation with academic success. Ironically, Ogbu's theory was used to explain minority underperformance in public education; however, in Catholic schools varying perspectives explain the lack of an achievement gap.

The second aspect of minority achievement motivation deals directly with motivation to succeed. When prompted directly (Question #8): *Do you acknowledge differences in motivation among student of varying racial backgrounds?* The answers were fairly one-sided; personnel perceived that minorities at the very least appeared more motivated in relation to their white peers. Evidence supporting minority students as being more motivated was no less abundant. One administrator referenced the aspect of varying perspectives, indicating that for many minority students their motivation grew from being the first individual in their family on track to graduate high school, in comparison to their white peers who often had two parents with college degrees. Others credited the perspective that many of her minority students viewed academic success as a chance to get out of "the ghetto" and continue their studies in a different part of the country, while once again for a majority of white students attending college was expected. The most interesting source of minority motivation resulted from how students perceived the academic hierarchy. Dr. Mangel,⁵ a freshman English Literature teacher argued that shortly into the beginning of each year he was able to notice an obvious

⁵ Pseudonym

divide between racial backgrounds and achievement. According to Dr. Mangel, many of his minority students had been previously educated in the public system and therefore did not possess academic skills comparable to their white peers who have been educated in the Catholic system since grade school. Furthermore, the divide was so obvious even students, white and minority alike, were aware of the varied racial skill levels. However, Dr. Mangel believed that this conscious understanding of their lesser academic skills motivated minority students to work harder. The resulting minority mentality accepted they (minority students) were behind because they did not have equal opportunities in the earlier stages of the academic careers. However, now that they were on a level playing field they would use the resources available to them to overcome what “a decade of public education had failed to do.” This researcher’s understanding of this mentality believes minority students are aware they were previously educated in a disadvantaged environment and are not surprisingly, products of their environment. However, now that they have been given the opportunity to compete with their white peers they would do whatever was necessary to catch up and possibly even surpass their white peers academically.

Relating to minorities as being the more motivated relative to their white peers, many teachers mentioned the work ethic of their minority students. A history teacher from Philadelphia indicated she was taken back by the percentage of minority students who would complete extra credit assignments. In this teacher’s experience it seemed as though when she offered an extra credit assignment every minority student would complete it. Not to say that white students would not take advantage of these assignments, but as she phrased it “an overwhelmingly majority of the time the black kids

were the one who would take advantage of whatever I was offering.” Furthermore, one teacher mentioned students leave the school for one of two reasons. Either students are incapable of maintaining the minimum grade point average or they choose not to complete the intensive work load that is required. Despite these pressures to succeed, minority students have the highest retention rate among any social group in the school. Indicating minority students are most able to maintain the minimum GPA and cope with the intensive work load.

At the conclusion of an interview with one particularly lively gentleman who taught high school English this researcher having realized he failed to do so in previous interviews inquired whether in the opinion of the interview subject they believed Catholic education truly does impact minority achievement. This teacher proudly responded: “of the four highest cumulative GPAs in last year’s graduating class, three of them belonged to black students,” indicating Catholic schools do in fact produce higher achieving minority students. It was reassuring that after such exhausting efforts analyzing existing theories, transcribing interviews and analyzing their contents that this topic of minority achievement in Catholic schools does in fact exist.

Although the significance of this research attempted to determine the factors incorporated in Catholic education which yield to heightened minority achievement in the event that somehow educators might gain insight into alleviating a great social inequity; the findings have somewhat disconcerting implications. Although this research indicates that minorities do perform at significantly higher academic levels in Catholic schools, the factors responsible for their achievement (achievement motivation) are the hardest to translate into public education. In light of the myriad attempts educators have attempted

such as creating magnet schools, school choice programs, etc., it is unfortunate that the only model of education with a reduced achievement gap is unable to be reproduced the public sector.

Given the limitations of the research methods it is foreseeable that future research consisting of more in-depth and varied methods might reveal additional aspects of Catholic education which result in increased minority achievement. However, in the meantime it appears that this project and others (i.e. secondary sources) will remain unable to contribute to reducing the achievement gap; an inequality which will continue to have dire consequences on social equality.

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Appendix:

Interview Guideline⁶:

1. Could you give me some background as to your experience in education?⁷
 - (Years involved in education, years at location, position, personal background, etc.)
2. Does your current school offer a tracked curriculum? If so, how is it structured?

⁶ This guideline was updated based upon respondents' feedback. Attached is the most recent guideline used to frame the last three interviews.

⁷ To clarify, I asked my subjects to base their answers upon whatever experience they have had in the Catholic sector, rather than simply the school where they are currently employed.

3. How would you describe the diversity of your school setting? (Classrooms, extra-curricular activities, programs) Are students encouraged to engage in diverse activities?
4. How would you rate the availability and quality of additional help/support?
5. Do you believe use of these services varies between students of varying ethnic backgrounds (i.e. Caucasian vs. minority)? If so, could you elaborate?
6. Do you believe significant differences in school attendance, discipline rates, parental education levels and income exist between students of varying ethnic background?
 - If these differences exist do you believe they have a strong impact on academic achievement?
7. How would you compare the academic abilities of students of varying ethnic backgrounds, upon entering your school? And once they graduate?
8. How would you compare the academic attitudes or motivation to achieve between students of varying ethnic backgrounds?
9. Do you support the theory that minority students perform comparatively better in Catholic school settings?
 - If so, from your perspective, what aspect of parochial education most significantly contributes to a reduced achievement gap (by race)?