Catholic Educational Leadership:
Exploring Overlapping Consensus of Catholic Identity Through Narrative Inquiry

by

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B.Ed., University of Alberta, 1988
M.Ed., University of Portland, 1995

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in the Faculty of Education

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University of Victoria

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

Catholic educational leaders serve as the primary faith leaders in their school community and remain influential in the public discourse of Catholic education. As insiders understanding the contextual educational landscape, and who are at the forefront of renewal and change within their own school communities, Catholic educational leaders are critical in providing an account and understanding of how their lived experience contributed to the formation of their Catholic identity. Through their daily interactions with parents, students, stakeholders, politicians, and community, their ability to articulate their Catholic identity as a school leader is imperative for the broader understanding of Catholic education.

This study, grounded in narrative inquiry methodology, explored the question “What is the lived experience of Catholic educational leaders in relation to shaping, informing, and influencing the conceptual formation of Catholic identity in 21st century schools?” This question resonates with the necessity to better understand how Catholic identity is lived authentically within Catholic schools for leaders who are entrusted with leading a diverse faith community. Four Catholic educational leaders share their stories of
experience, working within a relational three-dimensional space of temporality, sociality, and place as key considerations of inquiry. By living, reliving, telling, and retelling their stories to live by, threads of coherence and continuity link their personal, professional, and spiritual landscape.

Participant findings generated four organizing categories: Catholic identity, Catholic education, Catholic leadership, and relationships. Each category was subsequently framed with additional sub-categories to further develop and deepen Catholic identity as a storied landscape of experience within the framework of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry. Navigating this inquiry space gave rise to contradictions and tensions surrounding the articulation and expression of Catholic identity the difficult and complex role of Catholic educational leadership, the turmoil of an educational landscape that is challenging the relevance of Catholic education, and the dynamic and every evolving influence relationships have on faith formation.

To both insiders and outsiders of Catholic education, this study illuminates a better understanding of how Catholic educational leaders shape, form, and influence the conceptual formation of their Catholic identity in 21st century schools. It also provides a lens to view how diversity and unity of Catholic identity is constructed and understood narratively.
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Acknowledgments

My supervisor Dr. Katherine Sanford, who travelled with me on this incredible journey, always guiding, supporting, and mentoring with gentleness, kindness, and great wisdom. Without Dr. Sanford’s unceasing encouragement, this dissertation would not have been possible, never even considered.

My supervisory committee, Dr. Tim Hopper and Dr. Graham McDonough, who challenged my thinking by posing daunting questions which helped me to grow in faith, knowledge, and confidence.

The participants of this study who dared to believe this was a worthwhile inquiry and dedicated years of their time to explore a research question that resonated deeply for them personally and professionally. What started as a research relationship resulted in an enduring friendship rooted in tremendous gratitude and infinite respect.

Fr. Jim Corrigan, a man of faith whom I am humbled and honored to call friend.

Sr. Annata Brockman, whose earthly and heavenly guidance continues.

My husband Larry, who watched me for five years at the kitchen table wondering if I would ever complete this dissertation, yet always believing that God’s will, would be done, in God’s time.

My brother Francesco, always a blessing, a confidant, and a hero.

My parents Ida and Paolino, who gave me the gift of life and faith. Tenant farmers from Southern Italy, who immigrated to Edmonton in the early 1960’s, with little education or money, my mother and father believed in God’s providence. They walked by faith and not by sight. Their lived story, now, my story to live by.
Dedication

To all people who work feverishly to honor the dignity of others

Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.

(John Wesley)
Chapter 1: Narrative Beginnings

Catholic Education – A Personal Journey

To say that I have been involved in formal Catholic education my entire life would be only a slight exaggeration of the truth. It is fact that as a six year old, I attended the first of eleven Catholic schools that would sculpt and influence my Catholic identity as student, teacher, and principal. It has been a life-long endeavour to articulate and understand the fullness of my Catholic faith as a first-generation Italian in Canada. My parents were formative in my faith, being the first example of Catholic formation, devotion, and reverence. Every life decision, struggle and joy was grounded in prayer, permeated in Catholic faith, and expressed in humble obedience to what my mother described as the will of God. Life experiences have sculpted my evolving Catholic identity by softening the contours of some questions while sharpening the edges of others.

My faith, most significantly, has challenged me as a Catholic educational leader. Because this role constitutes an array of responsibilities ranging from being hall patrol to the financial manager of a three-million-dollar budget, to being the project manager of a shed to store hockey equipment, the formation of my Catholic identity often loses rank on the exhaustive list of “to do today” priorities often managerial in nature. I reconcile this inadequacy by telling myself that my faith as a school principal is a work in progress; one that is constantly in tension with the multitude of responsibilities that I, as a school leader, am assigned. I console myself by remembering that I am a committed practicing Catholic actively involved in my parish by serving on Council, singing in the choir, and leading baptism preparation. Surely this counts for something, my head rationalizes. Meanwhile, my heart aches with the desire to be a witness of my faith in all aspects of my life, both
personally and professionally. I am left with a disjointed sense of self-yearning for coherence, continuity, and most important, credibility.

Trying to reconcile these tensions of Catholic identity in my role as a Catholic educational leader explicitly provoked my research study: What is the lived experience of Catholic educational leaders in relation to shaping, informing, and influencing the conceptual formation of Catholic identity in 21st century schools? This question resonates with my desire to better understand how Catholic identity is lived authentically within Catholic schools for leaders who are entrusted with leading a diverse faith community consisting of students, staff, and parent community. I have struggled with this and I am left to question why these tensions play such a tug of war daily game. The words of Mimi Schutloffel (2012) reaffirm my need to explore how “Catholic identity development is at the heart of our role as Catholic educators” (p. 149). Given this serious and awesome responsibility, I as the Catholic educational leader am left with many obligations that demand more than being able to decide whether the power source in the hockey academy shed should be included in the initial installation or outsourced to save a few extra dollars. This study clearly situated me as an insider, providing the opportunity for an introspective analysis of Catholic educational leadership. Alongside my participants I found myself inquiring into our difference and commonality and to become critically engaged from both an introspective and extrospective stance. This duality both revised and confirmed aspects of Catholic identity as I compared and contrasted my narrative alongside those of my participants, exposing a critical voice of self, other, common good, shared struggles, and diverse experience.
Catholic Education – A Sense of Identity

Groome (2002) basing his articulation on the work of social scientists states, “we need a sense of identity to live humanly, without it we literally feel lost. From the Latin identitas, meaning “the same, repeatedly,” identity is that which holds together a continuous sense of our human “being” as a person or a community” (Groome, 2002, p. xix). It is the metaphorical glue that binds who we are as individuals and who we are in community. “Identity is who we are and how we live…identity is the center that holds…otherwise…things fall apart” (Groome, 2002, p. xix). For Catholics, this definition of Catholic identity invokes an understanding of how faith informs, shapes, and influences one’s articulation of belief and practices in the context of lived experience. He explains that our identity “emerges as we absorb the worldview, value system, and sense of person reflected in our family of origin and then in the culture and society around us” (p. xix). As we gather life experiences the strands of our identity weave our sense of self. We begin to express our identity by composing stories to live by; stories of our past, stories of our present, and stories of our future.

How is Catholic identity formed? According to Feinberg (2006), religious identity is constructed systematically and formally across many landscapes; school, church, and home. It is in these different places “where students learn the practices, rituals, beliefs, and commitments that distinguish their religion from others, and where they take on the identity of a specific faith community” (p. 18). Understanding this shared responsibility requires educators, clergy, and parents to work in mutual cooperation and understanding towards a common vision of what comprises faith formation of children within the broader landscape of personal identity.
Given that Catholic schools serve a diverse population of both Catholic and non-Catholic students, the tension of what Catholic identity and faith formation actually entails becomes nebulous. Thus, Catholic educational leaders find themselves straddling the expectations of how best to serve the educational needs of students, given that their parents might not be Catholic and might not attend Church. Groome (1998) provides the example of Catholic education in Pakistan where “all are predominantly Muslim in faculty and enrolment. Most have less than 5 percent Christian students” (p. 10). Using this as an exemplar, Groome (1998) illustrates how within such a diverse cultural and religious context, Catholic schools remain distinct because they:

Promote the value of the person—encourage a positive outlook on life and challenge the fatalism that pervades the surrounding culture; they build up a sense of school community and promote friendship from class and ethnic divides. They also encourage students to develop a personal spirituality, to commit to justice and peace, to respect those who are different. (p. 10)

Common ground is found by providing what Groome (1998) describes as education that has a “humanizing curriculum...where values permeate the ethos and style of the schools...where a spiritual vision for education could have universal appeal” (pp.10-11). Potentially tensions manifest between home, schools, and church when the presumed identity of students is taken for granted (Feinberg, 2006, p. 27). Unity in diversity, however, is achievable when Catholic educational leaders become the voice of reasoned and thoughtful commitment ensuring the wellbeing of all children.

Understanding that a Catholic school imbued with a humanizing school curriculum serves
a diversity of student learners thus becomes a conceptual framework Catholic educational leaders need to embody for the formation of Catholic identity.

It is necessary for the Catholic educational leader to have a sense of identity. This is not easy when roles and responsibilities are never ceasing and constantly changing. Building an identity involves “constructing a location – a center– from which events may be viewed and present and future events judged” (Feinberg, 2006, p. 18). To identify as Catholic requires a deliberate and intentional mindset where life is viewed, lived, and understood as congruent with Catholic teachings. Convey (2012) presents the complexity of Catholic identity in education by stating, “individual scholars who have studied Catholic schools have affirmed the importance of the principal and the teachers in creating the environment necessary for a good Catholic school with a strong Catholic identity. Particularly important in Catholic schools (is) the leadership of the principal” (p. 192). Understanding the complexity of how identity is formed, Arbuckle (2013) suggests that reference to Catholic identity in the singular does not sufficiently capture its complexity or multiplicity but rather reduces it to “something univocal” (p.xvii).

Using the example of Christ’s life events, Arbuckle (2013) outlines how “the New Testament the founding and legitimizing mythological identities of the Christian faith–the life, death, and resurrection of Christ –are told and retold in the multiple narratives of the gospels” (p. 130). Reading the life experiences of Christ, from a variety of perspectives allows for a broad understanding of the teachings of Christ. By relating events in a way people in every century can identify with, along with multiple perspectives for interpretation, provides the opportunity to shape a Catholic identity responsive to the needs of a 21st century education (Arbuckle, 2013, p. 130). Catholic
educational leaders, as they develop, form, and reform their understanding of Catholic identity, can be guided by the example of Christ using narrative to articulate his teachings and mission evoking personal and cultural transformation whilst remaining responsive to the individual and contextual needs of the time. By subscribing to a singular understanding of Catholic identity, the life teachings of Christ, 2000 years later, could seem out-dated and irrelevant.

Arbuckle (2013) clarifies the tension embedded within a singular understanding of identity by noting “identity connotes two paradoxical realities: sameness and uniqueness. We share similar qualities with other human beings, but at the same time we know that each of us has unique characteristics that mark us as different” (p. 2). Arbuckle (2013) proposes moving away from the singular notion of identity where the “self is an autonomous, stable, structural entity composed of factors and traits that “add up” to a total person without that person’s active involvement, and transcending her or his particular place in culture, language, and history” (p.2). By stretching the understanding of identity beyond the notion of being something only static, univocal, and unchanging, Arbuckle (2013) suggests it is time to consider that “identity is a process of self-engaging with context” (p.6). As the context changes, so there is potentially a new identity, a new identifying role to play, that a person must acknowledge in some way or other. So it is more accurate to say that a person has an identity that is never fixed but rather always in a process of dynamic flux because the context in which he or she lives is changing. Bringing faith into every aspect of a life thus remains as an emerging, reforming, and developing identity, based on experiences and how they are understood and articulated. In fact, Arbuckle (2013) presents eleven variations of how Catholic identity is expressed:
Arbuckle (2013) begins by describing the Traditional Catholic as an individual who does “not question teachings of the pope and bishop [and is] concerned for personal salvation with little commitment to social justice” (p. 62). The Vatican II Catholic instead, “is prepared if necessary to challenge the church and society [with an] emphasis on social justice inspired by a gospel-based spirituality” (Arbuckle, 2013, p. 62). Those individuals who consider themselves committed to the church but trapped in fundamentalist interpretations of Vatican II fall within the identity of Fundamentalist Catholics further categorized as either right or left wing depending on their stance on social justice issues. Arbuckle (2013) describes Selective Catholics as “rejecting some beliefs and practices of the church [but maintaining a] strong commitment at times to social justice” (p. 63). Independent, Minimalist, and Utilitarian Catholics, are characterized in accordance to their affiliation with church teachings with Independent and Utilitarian ignoring church teachings that do not align with contemporary life, while Minimalists identify as Catholic but “generally they live their lives unaware, uninterested, or unaffected by the activities and teachings of the church” (Arbuckle, 2013, p. 63). Disengaged Catholic, according to Arbuckle (2013) are characterized as non-Catholics because “the church no longer has any relevance in their lives [and they] distrust ecclesiastical leadership” (p. 64). Migratory, Postmodern, and Lamentative Catholics, generally attend Mass with varying degrees of distrust and impatience with ecclesiastical patriarchy (Arbuckle, 2013, p. 65). It is the Postmodern Catholic who according to Arbuckle (2013), “inclined to accept cultural relativity as the only universal truth” (p. 64).
These eleven models, as presented by Arbuckle, provide a framework for how people express their Catholic identities. Arbuckle (2013) summarizes by stating that, “whereas in modernity people considered that each person has a fundamentally unified and unchanging identity, postmodernists claim that individuals have multiple and conflicting identities” (p. 55). Thus it can be asserted that while Catholic identity manifests itself within different roles and responsibilities, a universal definition is limited and does not take into consideration the possibility for renewal, reform, or growth. Sugrue (2005c) suggests that the idiosyncratic nature of identity formation, in particular, is a dynamic and fluid process which is connected to the leader’s learning trajectory, life experiences, context of the school community, and societal change (p.162). Rather, developing a coherent notion of Catholic identity that resonates with the practices, rituals, beliefs and commitments of a Catholic community, establishes a common core of understanding, remaining permeable to accommodate individual and reflective life experiences. Such a thoughtful, reflective and contemplative process of articulating Catholic identity could prove helpful and necessary for the Catholic educational within the context of this study especially taking into account the diversity of the communities they serve. Catholic identity forms within a Catholic community but ultimately manifests itself within different roles and responsibilities in society. As such, a Catholic identity is not universal but has coherence with the practices, rituals, beliefs and commitments of a Catholic community. Ultimately, this complexity places the Catholic educational leader in the vortex of inquiry whereby understanding how the lived experience informs, shapes, and influences the conceptual formation of Catholic identity and how it contributes significantly to a 21st century educational landscape.
A Research Question Emerges

As a school aged child, being Catholic was very clear for me, my identity never considered in conflict. I attended Catholic schools, I went to church with my parents regularly, my friends and relatives were Catholic, I received all of the sacraments of initiation, studied the Catechism, and many of my teachers were priests or nuns. Being Catholic was netted in a distinct bubble; orderly and unchallenged. My landscape of experience situated me in this protective bubble isolated from the threat of any dissention. I never imagined myself on the educational landscape where Catholics and non-Catholics alike would challenge the necessity of Catholic education; and contend that it is an expendable choice in 21st century schooling. I suppose I could have been attentive rather than oblivious, engaged rather than complacent and apathetic. What I failed to realize is that my identity as a child of Italian Roman Catholic immigrants was different than someone whose parents had immigrated from Poland, Germany, or Ukraine. In fact, simply speaking my Catholic identity was influenced by the very fact that my parents were immigrants and not Canadian born. Bramadat and Seljak (2009) acknowledge these layers of complexity by stating “the issue of identity is complex for almost everyone [questioning] which parts are religious and which are ethnic” (p.20). They propose that these two strands of ethnicity and religion are in fact dynamic, requiring close attention to how they are being negotiated and understood.

Thus the bubble began to burst when I began my work as a Catholic principal. Not only did the role include responsibilities never imagined, but some of my duties directly conflicted with my sense of Catholic identity. It seemed that parents, students, and even colleagues did not have the same notion of Catholic identity as mine. I remained
imprisoned by my limited understanding of Catholic identity as being either right or wrong, rooted in the understanding that everyone should have the same Catholic identity. Because of this limited understanding, at times, I felt alone at not only defending my Catholic faith, but also in articulating the good work that Catholic education has provided in the province of Alberta for 113 years. I did not take into consideration that others were expressing their Catholic identity differently. As a result, I as a Catholic educational leader felt vulnerable, when challenged with being able to provide safe and caring learning environments for LGBTQ students in my school. I was shaken, both personally and professionally, when such allegations were not only asserted by the media, but also by those entrusted with advocating for Catholic education.

As an insider to Catholic education over the span of an entire lifetime, such public challenges splinter the very core of who I believe myself to be as a Catholic educator. These challenges shake my sense of Catholic identity and tempt me initially to become defensive. Once my nerves settle, I contemplate the gravity of LGBTQ students feeling isolated, ridiculed, or unsafe. I am challenged to reflect with overwhelming intent on how Catholic education serves the Other and respects the dignity of all students, including LGBTQ students choosing Catholic education. Specifically, as a Catholic education leader, I feel ultimately responsible for establishing a safe and caring school climate for all students, at all times, in all situations.

My research question seeks to explore the question “What is the lived experience of Catholic educational leaders in relation to shaping, informing, and influencing the conceptual formation of Catholic identity in 21st century schools?” This question is important not only for understanding my own Catholic identity, but critical for the
broader understanding of how Catholic education is contextually understood within the current 21st century educational landscape where some public school advocates claim that Catholic education is simply an expensive, redundant, and unnecessary option. Mulligan (2006) posits the following to Catholic educators, “you are being challenged by people at the wall to define yourselves and to articulate your distinctiveness as a publicly-funded education institution” (p. 13). Are Catholic educational leaders prepared to have this “conversation at the wall?” Mulligan presages (2006), “it is impossible to go to the wall and engage those at the wall in a conversation unless together, all of you, agree and are clear as to your purpose, mission, and meaning. This clarity demands a shared conversation about Catholic education in Canada and the precarious situation in which it finds itself” (p. 13). As a Catholic educational leader, I have often found myself unable to name the necessary characteristics that constitute Catholic identity when discussing the distinctiveness of Catholic education. This inability to express Catholic identity to self and others is a frightening awareness not easily resolved and, in times of complacency, easily dismissed as unnecessary. Such a luxury can no longer be afforded. Schuttloffel (2012) clearly articulates the importance of the role of the Catholic educational leader as foundational to creating a Catholic school culture insofar as building Catholic identity. According to Schuttloffel (2012), “a Catholic leader’s character is shaped by experiences within multiple communities, cultures, and contexts. This formation plays an important role in shaping the character of a school leader and ultimately his or her ability to create a faith learning community within their school” (p. 153). According to Schuttloffel (2012), “an additional contextual complication is that this leading population has experienced a poor theological knowledge…a weak preparation
for spiritual leadership” (p. 151). Consequently, if Catholic educational leaders feel they are ill prepared for this multifaceted role, it proves difficult to articulate and enact “the distinctive nature of their role” (Schutlofâl, 2012, p. 153). Ideally, according to Schutlofâl (2012), the Catholic education leader would possess “not only an understanding of the Church’s theology, teaching, and Gospel values, but [also] embrace these beliefs and practices into their daily life” (p. 152) This obligation of lived experience, she asserts, establishes the common core of Catholic identity characteristics. Schutlofâl explains that because Catholic school leaders are confronted by a technological-secular-consumerist culture that is universal, tensions exist between contemporary culture and lived experiences. As a suggestion, Schutlofâl proposes Catholic leaders begin by understanding their life story so that they are authentically able to lead a Catholic education institution in a distinct and faith-filled manner. This understanding further substantiates the importance of my research question where I propose that through narrative inquiry methodology, I will offer Catholic educational leaders the opportunity to reflect upon their school leadership in the 21st century by sharing stories of experience that influence the conceptual formation of Catholic identity within a 21st century context. How will Catholic educational leaders, who are insiders at the forefront of this contentious discourse, explain the conceptual influences that shape, inform, and frame their Catholic identity?

**Catholic Education: A Slippery Slope**

Formal Catholic education in Alberta dates back 150 years, before Alberta was a province and when the region was named North West Territory, with the arrival of Father Albert Lacombe at Lac St. Anne in 1852 and the Grey Nuns in St. Albert in 1863.
Alberta’s first school districts were subsequently created in 1885. Given at the time that the non-Aboriginal population north of Red Deer was overwhelmingly Roman Catholic, these first school districts were Roman Catholic largely run by priests and nuns (Albertaviews, Going Public, 2015). These first Catholic schools were parochial, meaning that they were organized, owned and operated by Church clergy, missionaries or authorities. Parents were charged a nominal fee for having their child attend and this fee was often waived as an act of charity (Feehan, 2005). James Mulligan (2005) remembers his parents, in Ontario, paying five dollars a month for him to attend a private Catholic elementary school and fifteen dollars a month for him to attend a Catholic high school (p. 17). Mulligan’s example demonstrates the commitment and willingness to pay for a faith-based education. Back in those days, “the why and how of Catholic education were clear and obvious: teach the Catechism and our tradition, and share the faith practices of Catholicism” (p. 17). This univocal and universal acceptance of what compromised Catholic identity remaining unchallenged.

As outlined by Peters (1998), “until the second half of the 19th century, schools were seen as vehicles whereby Christian civilization might be preserved...religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education forever be encouraged” (pp. 1-2). The Constitution Act of 1867 provided constitutional protection for the educational rights of Catholic and Protestant parents in Ontario and Quebec. Similarly, the Alberta Act of 1905 that established the province of Alberta as a member of Confederation applied these same constitutional guarantees for publicly funded separate schools for both Catholic and
Protestant minorities. The School Act (2000), current as of June 1, 2015, states the province’s commitment:

WHEREAS there is one publicly funded system of education in Alberta whose primary mandate is to provide education programs to students through its two dimensions, the public schools and the separate schools, in such a way that the rights guaranteed under the Constitution of Canada of separate school electors are preserved and maintained. (p.11)

Presently, education is determined and formulated by provincial education policies and follow the Programs of Studies and the curriculum approved by the provincial department of education (Alberta Education, 2013). Oversight of school boards across the province lies with the Alberta Ministry of Education. Responsibility for the oversight of individual schools lies with district school boards. Currently, there are 17 Catholic School Boards in Alberta serving 412 Catholic schools. They are publicly funded and their mission is to provide faith-based education to approximately 166,000 students in their care. In 2016, this constituted approximately 23% of all students in Alberta. (Alberta Education Website, 2017)

One might be inclined to conclude that Catholic education, because of its Constitutional protection, healthy student enrolment, and prudent financial management would remain unchallenged as an alternative choice to public education. Such is not the case. As explained by Gleeson (2015), “Catholic Education systems face a number of challenges today including Church/state relations, the relationship between faith and culture, the meaning of Catholic identity, declining levels of religious observance and the aging profile of religious teaching communities” (p. 145). Peters (1998) concurs by
furthering the argument, “Catholic education in Canada functions in an environment which is changing rapidly in ways which considerably reduce the strength of its statutory and constitutional supports” (p. 12). Simply stated, Catholic educators cannot simply rely on Constitutional rights as the default to a publicly funded system. D’Souza (2003) echoes similar sentiments by explaining that:

Constitutions are human documents, and through amendments they evolve and change. One does not require constitutional specialization in order to predict that the changing demographics and the multicultural and pluralist nature of the Canadian federation will contribute to the evolution of the Canadian Constitution. (p. 366)

Mulligan (2006) implores provinces such as Alberta, Ontario, and Saskatchewan to learn from the demise of Catholic education in other Canadian provinces, specifically Quebec, and Newfoundland and Labrador, by posing such questions as:

Are we on a constitutional slippery slope? If the constitutional religious rights of the minority in Newfoundland and Labrador can be abrogated for financial reasons what is to say that the cost factors and the public opinion of the majority might not be determining factors in abolishing constitutional rights for Catholic education elsewhere? (p. 111)

Catholic education seeks to elicit both a contemporary and historic identity necessary and relevant in understanding, articulating, and contributing to a just and civil 21st century society. D’Souza (2003) probes with the question, “Could Canadian Catholic education take the lead by its inherent respect for religious diversity…and thus become a source of civic and humanistic unity?” He concludes that such an argument could very well ensure
the constitutional rights of Catholic education in the context of the modern world. This shift in thinking could very well serve address the concern of Peters (1998) where he postulates, “decreasing value is placed on the sacred as an intrinsic element in life; and while those who wish to develop a spiritual life are tolerated, resistance to including this aspect of formation...is increasing” (p. 286). Catholic identity of leaders, under such tenuous times, suggests additional inquiry and examination is required as they navigate to build Catholic culture in their respective school communities.

There is a cautionary message in thinking that only Catholics have a vested interest in religious education. Feinberg (2006) points out that “everyone has a stake in what goes on inside religious schools because everyone has a stake in maintaining and advancing an informed and democratic citizenry” (p. xiv). This has significant importance in my study given that Catholic educational leaders must be able to explain what exactly differentiates a Catholic school from their public school counterpart. Convincing testaments to the value of Catholic education for all of society must be articulated to all stakeholders. Catholic educational leaders, serving as the primary faith leaders in their school community, are vital to the survival of Catholic schools; they are situated at the forefront of renewal and change. Through their daily interactions with parents, students, stakeholders, politicians, and community, their ability to articulate their Catholic identity as a school leader is indispensable to the defense of Catholic education.

As stated by Dean Sarnecki (2015), Executive Director of the Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association, “it is the repeat of the loss of Catholic education through apathy, giving in to societal trends, through infighting and compromising on important values, which eventually led to the dissolution of denominational education. This isn’t a
scare tactic. This is real and we need to be doing a better job of expressing who we are and what we stand for” (p.6). Believing that there is enough protection for Catholic schools based on constitutional rights remains shaky. Compounding the vulnerability of Catholic schools is a dismal sense of vision and commitment, whilst polarization from an increasingly secular and pluralistic society increases. Arthur (2009) suggests, “secular educational theory has turned away from religion to science as the standard by which the nature of a human being is defined, and has become preoccupied with measure, quantifiable, observable, and replicable behaviour, effectively divorcing the physical from the spiritual” (p. 236). In essence, “the secular has created the illusion that humanity can take control of itself and its own destiny – that we are totally self-sufficient” (Arthur, 2009, p. 236). This line of reasoning squarely positions the Catholic educational leader, or any persona of faith, in a tension of identity between the internal self and the external self. Arthur (2009) continues, “A person of faith would therefore presumably have to think in two different realms – the secular and the religious, which are seen as unconnected and their minds would presumably have to use different ‘reasoning’ powers” (p. 236).

Although such discourse would appear to nudge Catholic education to the brink of extinction, Peters (1998) remains hopeful by stating, “many members of Canadian society see an intrinsic connection between education, value formation, and a religious development and clearly expect more from their schools than a secular, value-free expose to a soulless curriculum” (p. 14). It becomes important, as Bibby (2012) states, to remain mindful that in today’s society, “a solid core of people continue to value faith, but a growing core do not. A significant portion remain in the middle-something like ‘the
politically undecided’ -- dropping in and not dropping out” (p. 10). We have, as Bibby (2012) states, [this] ambivalent middle … [that has] not slammed the door on possible religious involvement” (p. 19). They remain watchful of what the future holds and how Catholic Churches and schools will evolve to meet the needs of a 21st century society.

**Importance of the Research**

The importance of exploring the distinctiveness of Catholic education and how it shapes, informs, and influences the conceptual formation of Catholic identity in 21st century Catholic schools is not only timely but necessary. McDonough (2011) outlines the imminent challenges:

Catholic schooling, like any type of religious schooling, faces many criticisms regarding its existence…Some claim that Catholic schools are socially divisive institutions that stifle the development of citizenship in the modern pluralistic nation-state. Others arise concerns that they erode students’ democratic competence or limit their autonomy. Stronger forms of this latter criticism even assert that Catholic schools indoctrinate students. Finally in places like…parts of Canada, among several others, there is a criticism that they draw unjustly on the public purse…. The critiques of this kind would promote common, secular schooling instead of Catholic (or any religious) schooling. (p. 272)

Rossiter (2013) further posits the importance by stating, “Catholic identity has become a crucial issue: “Maintaining a Catholic identity in Catholic educational institutions emerges as the challenge for Catholic education, in a 21st century cultural context that is increasingly ambivalent if not hostile, to religion” (p. 1). Catholic education in Alberta has experienced this hostility expressed by Rossiter as a result of the changing political
landscape and the mounting pressures of special interest groups. Tensions recently manifested and snowballed into a hostile publicly displayed showdown, when a few Catholic Trustees challenged the local Bishops on the writing of a stand-alone transgender policy versus a general policy on safe and caring schools. Regardless of who won the match, confidence of Catholic educators eroded on a daily basis when the dominating narrative depicted Catholic schools as not being able to provide safe and caring learning communities. Ironically, government instituted accountability documents completed by educators, students, and parents, rank Alberta Catholic schools in the top third as safe and caring. While outsiders might conclude that such disagreement was intra-Catholic, the lived experience during this time suggests otherwise. Such dissonance did not bode well for public support of Catholic schools -- especially Catholic schools that are publicly funded.

According to Frabutt et al. (2013), after reviewing 15 years of Catholic school research focused on books and peer reviewed journals dating from 1995-2010, only “10% concerned the topic of school leadership” (p. 86). Of the research reviewed, evidence surrounding the complexity of the role of educational leader remains of central interest to scholarly inquiry. Given the responsibilities mandated by school boards, church, and society, school principals “are far more than managerial or instructional leaders, but are spiritual leaders charged with daily pastoral care, faith formation, and the revelation of God in and among the happenings of school” (Frabutt et al., 2013, p. 87). As well, school principals are responsible for student enrolment, financial management, instructional leadership, student conduct, and a myriad of other duties and obligations.
To further complicate matters, Catholic educational leaders are asked to strengthen Catholic identity in schools regardless of the diverse expectations and challenges imposed by political platforms, secular, individualistic and relativist ideologies. Such requests urge a diverse understanding of what constitutes Catholic identity and challenge a static discourse. I have felt these tensions as a Catholic school principal. Meeting the expectations of differing stakeholders, living up to a towering set of expectations, and making decisions affecting an entire school remain staggering responsibilities. Such expectations also vary from school to school, district to district and beyond as the contextual culture of each school is invariably nuanced with unique characteristics. Catholic educational leaders are challenged with being able to articulate and embody their Catholic identity, within these complex communities while remaining loyal to the teachings of the Church. McDonough (2012) express this aim by stating, “Catholic schools are worldwide phenomena that in each incarnation achieve some balance between the norms of the whole Church and their particular contexts” (p. 10).

Catholic educational leaders become the shock absorbers and primary advocates for articulating the importance of maintaining distinct, publicly funded Catholic schools. They are at the forefront of the discourse due to their lived experience as insiders yet their voices are seldom heard. Their involvement and perception is critical for not only articulating their Catholic identity, but also for asserting the distinctiveness of Catholic education, and nurturing the formation of future Catholic leaders. Groome (2014) elucidates:

In our time, too, we are in a ‘new world’ by way of Catholic schools…after the Reformation…Catholic schools took on a more urgent role of defending and
sustaining Catholic faith from the threat of an alternative (one secular public
school system), often being proposed at least implicitly by the state. (p. 1)

If Catholic educational leaders are not able to articulate their Catholic identity, and how
21st century Catholic education serves the common good of society, the threat of
defunding Catholic schools becomes imminent. Therefore, “renewed scholarly
efforts…will allow educational leaders to help fashion Catholic schooling in ways that
benefit the common good while responding to the educational and formational needs of
Catholic school students and parents…to sustain, strengthen, and transform educational
practices for the good of our children” (Frabutt et al., 2013, p. 91). Thus, my research
question that specifically asks what is the lived experience of Catholic educational leaders
in relation to shaping, informing, and influencing the conceptual formation of Catholic
identity in 21st century schools is both a necessary and timely scholarly inquiry given the
changing landscape. Such research “empowers the human person by helping Catholic
leaders come to a deeper understanding of their faith, serves to contribute to scholarly
studies that further the common good of Catholic schooling and responding to the
problems and needs of this age” (Grace and O’Keefe, 2007, pp. 2-3).
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Educational Leadership in the 21st Century

Research on leadership is abundant and plentiful. A simple Google search or an extensive scholarly review of the word “leadership” will result in a copious amount of results. Everything from leadership definition, leadership skills, leadership qualities, types of leadership, leadership quotes, and leadership styles will appear on the computer screen. Leadership research has been well documented and many scholars have studied leadership, resulting in an abundant array of definitions, theories, and frameworks, emerging with concepts such as transformational, transactional, transcendental, authentic, situational, functional, and distributive leadership. While each of these leadership styles may share similar goals such as effective decision-making, building positive relationships, and financial expertise, the contextual setting of leadership in the 21st century might present varying challenges. Such variances contribute to the complexity of leadership and make it difficult to synthesize into a simple definition. Williams (2015) notes this complexity by defining leadership, “as the ability to achieve difficult, challenging goals through other people” (p. 10). Gardiner (2006) adds to this definition by explaining that leadership “is the art of making decisions…viewed as a shared process involving broad participation” (p. 62). It has been my experience that decision-making and achieving goals are primary duties squarely situated within the role of the leader, which include high levels of accountability.

Numerous theories of leadership have flooded the landscape claiming to be the solution for all leadership woes. One such example is transactional leadership; a leadership framework outlined as a simplistic exchange between leader and follower
whereby there is often an exchange of goods and services. A hierarchy driven model dominates the structure surrounding transactional leadership. Transactional leadership does little to engage with staff, however, and “information is shared on a limited, need to know basis, decision making rests with one powerful leader, not with the group as a whole, divergent thinkers are viewed as trouble makers and roles are determined by the head of the organization” (Gardiner, 2006, p. 71). Sergiovanni and Starratt (1993) refer to this type of leadership as “a quid pro quo between the leader and the follower” (p. 186). In a quid pro quo agreement one transfer is contingent upon a reciprocal transfer. If a person does something well then they can expect to be rewarded if they do something poorly they can expect to be punished. Ultimately, transactional leadership “focuses on people seeking their own, individual objectives and entails a bargaining over the individual interests of people going about their own separate ways (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1993, p. 186). Although educational leadership continues to evolve with features leaning towards a collaborative model, elements of transactional leadership still prevail, in places such as hiring of staff, with neither teachers nor administrators having a role in decision-making. Often, leaders are told from human resource departments which teachers will be placed at which schools with little input from the principal. Likewise, policies and procedures are often delegated to teachers from educational leaders such as principals, superintendent, and trustees with only superficial consultation.

Transformational leadership builds on the notion of transactional leadership by adding a more relational and communitarian component. “The focus of transformational leadership is on the communication of a community’s vision in a way, which secures commitment from members of the organization…looks for potential motives in followers,
seeks to satisfy higher needs, and engages the full person” (Lavery, 2011, p. 2). It is the aim of transformational leadership to “build community in that it involves an exchange of people seeking common aims, uniting them to go beyond their separate interests” (Telford, 1996, p.8). As suggested by Sergiovanni and Starratt (1993), “transformational leadership is concerned with end values such as freedom, community, equity, and justice” (p. 186). “The notion of transformational leadership, with its emphasis on charisma, inspiration, individual consideration, and intellectual stimulation…are necessary skills for school (leaders) if they are to meet the demands of the 21st century” (Lavery, 2011, p. 2). Such diverse models of leadership exemplify the underlying inferences as to how the leader’s identity is formed and articulated. If a leader understands their role simply as an exchange in goods as suggested by transactional model, there could be an inclination to simplify leadership to – ‘you do this for me and I will do this for you’ relationship. On the other hand, a transformational leader might be inclined to view their role as being relational to others. However, both models, perhaps appropriate in their time, do not seek to fulfill the current leadership landscape of a culturally diverse, technologically driven, and consumer-based market. Such complexities in leadership pose a challenge for Catholic educational leaders who need to root their role in faith, adding an additional layer of responsibility beyond the managerial and financial obligatory duties.

Rost and Burns (1991) outlines three fundamental problems that must be overcome by researchers, in order to advance the study of leadership in the 21st century. The first problem “relates to the emphasis on periphery and content in leadership” (p. 198). Rost and Burns (1991) explain this to be an overly developed focus on peripheral leadership elements such as “traits, personality characteristics, situational characteristics,
interpersonal style, and management abilities” (p. 198). Within an ever changing 21st
century world, Rost elicits diverse leadership attributes such as the ability to embrace the
inclusive and holistic approaches to consensual decisions making, being able to translate,
define, and frame issues in ways that garner attention, and being able to actively
encourage consideration of the wider context in pursuit of global goals such as social
justice. Unfortunately, peripheral characteristics of the leader have been the primary focus
of the writing surrounding leadership and have resulted in a “theoretical fuzziness” (Rost
and Burns, 1991, p. 198). According to Rost and Burns (1991), the second problem
related to the research on leadership is “the lack of a consistent definition of leadership”
(p. 198). Rost and Burns (1991) add, “The study of leadership ran into serious intellectual
difficulties. Leadership as a concept has dissolved into small and discrete meanings. A
recent study turned up 130 definitions of the word” (p. 4). The third problem identified by
Rost and Burns (1991) is with regards to the notion that “researchers and practitioners
[are] using a single paradigm to frame their work” (p. 199). This single paradigm has
traditionally placed leaders and followers in a relationship of coercion; a static
relationship of leader and follower at times creating hierarchical, patriarchal, and
competitive systems. Rost and Burns (1991) challenged this type of leadership by
suggesting it be viewed as “active participants in a dynamic and continually evolving
relationship” (p. 200). Parry and Kempster (2013) explain that, “most mainstream
leadership is concerned with leaders and followers, those in formal positions of authority
and an inherent consensus about authority” (p. 22). Coercion, sprouting within the
framework of hierarchical authority, suggests a type of leadership that seeks to satisfy
solely the needs of the leader with little regard for the follower. Further, coercive
leadership intensifies a dysfunction and deception implying that leadership is based on self-serving truths, selfish motivation, and hunger for power. Such notions of leadership might not fare positively for a 21st century society seeking inspirational leaders who can bring unity to an ever changing and dynamic milieu responsive to the needs of their respective community. Parry and Kempster (2014) suggest “an alternative perspective views leadership as relational and discursively constructed; a critical orientation that explores” (p. 22).

Leadership should be considered a humanizing experience both for the leader and for the follower, whereby “mutual purposes among member in the interaction process results in a collaborative collusion (which is) more holistic or integrated … (and) more oriented to what people ordinarily think of as a vision or mission” (p. 201). Within such a model, Catholic educational leaders could consider integrating faith-based values that contribute to cultivating a Catholic identity. There is a place, as Rost and Burns (1991) suggest, for “a higher morality” (p. 201) where leaders are able enact values, beliefs, and principles contributing to the wellness and care of the community. He lists leadership values such as collaboration, the common good, global concerns, diversity, civic virtues, freedom of expression, and substantive justice. These values run counterintuitive to stereotypical ideals that leadership is coercive, and Rost and Burns (1991) elicit that, “if these values and others like them are going to achieve dominance in the future, they must be embedded in a new understanding of what leadership is” (p. 202). This new understanding could very well serve Catholic educational leaders in their role to confidently, collaboratively and collectively address the distinct needs of a Catholic school.
Chris Lowney (2013) boldly states that the time is upon us to “reimagine leadership in a turbulent, fast changing, and sometimes unsettling new century” (p. 6) and explains that “we badly need to be jarred from some of our settled preconceptions about leadership because they have utterly failed us. And we need to be shocked into new ways of thinking and acting” (p. 7). According to Lowney, a reimagining of leadership is needed for an ever changing, and somewhat turbulent 21st century. He challenges leaders to stretch beyond their comfort zone and look the example of Pope Francis as he serves the poor and vulnerable. Lowney suggests that we can no “longer close our leadership deficit [by attending] one more leadership workshop, [or] by tinkering with our performance-management systems, or through other incremental solutions” (p.6).

Similarly, Burns (1978) asserts, “the crisis of leadership today is the mediocrity or irresponsibility of so many of the men and women in power…the fundamental crisis underlying mediocrity is intellectual…we fail to grasp the essence of leadership that is relevant to the modern age and hence we cannot agree even on the standards by which to measure, recruit, and reject it” (p. 2). Complexities in an ever-changing dynamic 21st century world have further accentuated what appears to be a problematic understanding of leadership to begin with.

**Catholic Educational Leadership in the 21st Century**

If such a paradigm shift in leadership is needed within the 21st century secular world, the concept of Catholic educational leadership faces even more paramount challenges. Undeniably, this type of leadership becomes exponentially more complex because of the contextual expectations imposed by the Church as institution, the government as governors, and society as people in community. How does one, therefore,
begin to understand Catholic educational leadership within a 21st century context? Given that the social and cultural context in which Catholic education is situated is constantly changing, the implication for Catholic educational leaders is equally complex.

Holter and Frabutt (2012) state that “the role of the Catholic school principal has changed drastically over the years, now demanding that school leaders display expertise in instruction, human resources, financial management, development, marketing, enrolment management, and community relations, among others” (p. 253). Although, an arduous list of responsibilities, how do these expectations differ from that of a public-school principal? While all principals are expected to handle managerial and educational responsibilities such as financial management and instructional leadership, the Catholic educational leader is additionally entrusted with the spiritual component of faith formation in working with both teachers and students. Such a responsibility is challenging when acknowledging that faith formation requires personal and professional attributes that are often abstract and not concretely defined in scope or sequence.

According to Treston (2012), challenges specific to Catholic educational leadership relate to the “Catholic school’s ecclesial mission to evangelize. Pope Francis, in his homily of the Mass for the Evangelization of Peoples states, “when we give of ourselves, we discover our true identity as children of God in the image of the Father and, like Him, givers of life; we discover that we are brothers and sisters of Jesus, to whom we bear witness. This is what it means to evangelize; this is the new revolution – for our faith is always revolutionary –, this is our deepest and most enduring cry” (July, 2015). Consequently, because Catholic identity does not remain rigidly defined in a document but it is lived and always changing, the leadership role is equally elusive. Pope Francis
has tried to genuinely open the Catholic leader’s mind by suggesting they embrace a pastoral and inclusive approach of what it means to develop a Catholic identity that is not rigid but changing in relation to a person’s life. With diverse opportunities for affiliation as a Catholic in the church, it becomes the mission of the Catholic educational leader to evangelize and to serve the different students, parents, and staff who identify in some way as being Catholic. Finding these nuggets of unique opportunity for nurturing a Catholic identity directly contributes to a sense of belonging within a Catholic community where all feel welcome and valued. This understanding of serving a diverse learning community, as presented by Pope Francis, contributes positively to the understanding of Catholic educational leadership as a call to genuinely serving the needs of students, staff, and community with care and compassion.

According to Treston (2012), an additional key consideration for Catholic educational leaders in the 21st century is embedded in the understanding that leadership is not simply a job or career but a vocation. The word *vocatus*, stemming from the Latin word meaning a summons or calling, invokes, as explained by Treston (2012) to work with a sense of vocation, whereby one must be willing to use their gifts and talents for the common good (p. 11). “To work with a sense of vocation is to make a commitment to widen the circle of life in creation” (Treston, 2012, p. 11). Mulligan (2016) expands the vocation of a Catholic educational leader to include an, “initial and on-going faith formation, awakening within each person that they have a vocation, that their baptism priesthood is being shaped into that of the ministry of Catholic education, and that they have the task of conserving and adding to the mission of Catholic education…leadership is charged with conserving and adding to identity” (J. Mulligan, personal communication,
Prophetic leadership in Catholic schools also encourages staff to celebrate their work as a vocation “by making a difference in the lives of their students” (Treston, 2012, p. 12). It is incumbent on the Catholic educational leader to empower their teachers to use their gifts and talents to not only serve the school community, but also remain “awake to the joy and mystery of being loved by God” (Treston, 2012, p.14). This call to baptismal priesthood is best explained by Pope Francis when he states, “in virtue of their baptism all the members of the people of God have become missionary disciples...all the baptised, whatever their position in the church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization” (Francis, 2013, Evangelii Gaudium, #120).

Edith Prendergast (2011), building on the notion of discipleship, encourages Catholic leaders of the 21st century to search for something new. She explains:

Prophets of our tradition have something to tell us about lifting our gaze and seeing anew. They looked at the world situation –the social, political, and spiritual environment -- and saw the possibility of something different. They called for a world of justice and harmony…they held on to God’s faithful promise in covenant. Strengthened and encouraged, they drew wisdom from the promise that prompted them to imagine new possibilities, miracles of grace. (pp. 22-23)

What could this different leadership be for Catholics? How does a Catholic educational leader work with the tensions of an ever changing and pluralistic 21st century society, a diverse student body, and teachers with varying curricular specialties often not including the subject of Religion? This is a salient topic in Catholic schools where the expression and formation of Catholic identity for each member resonates differently. It becomes the
responsibility of the Catholic educational leader to ensure that “given the pluralism of the composition of teaching personnel in the school this challenge is approached with both a profound respect for philosophical diversity and courageous leadership to align the curriculum with core values and beliefs in a Catholic tradition of education” (Treston, 2012, p. 8).

Thus, the importance of reflecting on one’s own faith formation is an important leadership practice. Schuttlof&aelig; (2013) states, “contemplative practice assumes a connection between a Catholic school and the theological teachings and institutional structure of the Catholic Church” (p. 95). Schuttlof&aelig; (2013) explains, “the heart is commonly reached, not through reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impression, by the testimony of facts and events…persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us” (p. xv). Contemplative leadership builds on Arbuckle’s metaphor by adding, “the heart represents a leader’s beliefs, values, and philosophic orientations, the head represents the leader’s worldview, knowledge, and skills; and the hand represents the decisions that result from the integration of the heart and the head (Schuttlof&aelig;, 2013, p. 83). Consequently, how Catholic educational leaders come to understand their own Catholic identity is foundational in beginning to understand the influence this brings to the leadership role. Thoughtful consideration on one’s own Catholic identity informs the Catholic educational leader in creating a culture where diversity of faith formation shapes, informs, and influences daily practice with welcome and belonging.

Cook (1998) beseeches Catholic educational leaders to be “architects for building the kingdom of God in their schools” (p. 133). Because school culture is a crucial factor
in school effectiveness, Cook (1998) articulates clearly that “in light of expanding research, one of the crucial challenges confronting educational leaders in all school settings involves creating, maintaining, and perfecting the school’s culture so that everything in the school supports its educative mission” (p. xvii). By using the metaphor of architect, Cook (1998), references the words of the Apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, by stating, “according to the grace of God given to me, like a wise master builder I lay the foundations of faith, and others build on what I have laid” (1 Cor 3:10).

Thus, a Catholic educational leader, as chief architect for building a Catholic school culture, has both a lofty task and a daunting responsibility. McDonough (2009), states, “Catholic education is a diverse field of practice, and as such represents many things to different individuals and groups” (p. 187). With this in mind, how do educational leaders even begin to meet the diverse needs of their school communities? Because educational leaders are considered to be instrumental as “cultural architect…master builder…and key players in the design and implementation of school culture…they must consciously, intentionally, deliberately, and systematically attend to the religious culture of their school (Cook, 1998, p. 138). However, it is necessary to first define what is Catholic culture and Catholic identity in today’s context before one can attempt to build it. Cook’s approach, assumes there is one correct and established manner to design school culture following a prescriptive model. McDonough (2015) cautions that although Cook “makes insightful contribution to conversations about Catholic schools, such a limited conception of Catholic culture and identity in singular terms does not recognize its diversity” (p. 1).

According to Sergiovanni (1995), leadership that serves a diverse community demands more than managerial and educational skill, but the keen ability to tend to
symbolic and cultural dimensions. Leadership in the 21st century is, according to Sergiovanni (1995), “one that taps the emotions of followers appeals to their values and responds to their connection with other people. It is a morally based leadership that represents a form of stewardship, a commitment to serve others and to serve ideals” (p. 20). Sergiovanni (1995) argued that in order to understand Catholic leadership, “the moral dimension of leadership must be moved from the periphery to the center of inquiry, discussion, and practice” (p. 2). Lavery (2012) builds on this insight by suggesting “one way of placing the moral dimension of leadership squarely at center stage is to view leadership through a transcendental lens of service and spirituality” (p. 1). This approach resonates with Lowney’s concept that leadership requires reimagining for the purpose of better serving the poor and vulnerable, Schuttlöffel’s challenge to contemplatively reflect on how leadership can greatly influence others through witness, and Sergiovaninni’s understanding that aligns a disposition of stewardship as a commitment to human connection.

Transcendental leadership differs from other leadership frameworks such as transactional and transformational, as Lavery (2012) explains, by “adding to the continuum the internal motivation of the leader to serve, linked with an over-arching appreciation of the importance of spiritual reflection and action...while elements of these models (transactional and transformational) are still valuable, Catholic school (leaders) are called to exercise leadership beyond organizational expertise and a collegial understanding of the leader’s vision” (p. 1). Sanders et al. (2003) note that “society and its organizations are changing, and new demands and requirements have emerged. Thus, in order...to meet current and future challenges, it is imperative they embrace the notion of
spirituality.” The transcendental leadership model “bridges the gap between spirituality and leadership” (p. 9). Sanders et al. (2003) suggest that, within this model, leaders no longer have to “check their spirituality in the closet before they enter the office, because by doing so they would be unable to be authentic and whole in their roles as leaders. [The transcendental leadership] model provides an alternative way of characterizing spiritually oriented leaders, as they strive to integrate spirituality into all aspects of their life…in the mind…. the heart… and soul and daily accomplishments of the leader” (p. 9). It is through this model of leadership whereby the Catholic educational leader is able to “move more closely to a world where human talents and energies will be maximized for the betterment of all, personally, organizationally, and globally” (Gardiner, 2006, p. 72). This universal call to service transcends religious beliefs or doctrine. As described by Hermans (2017), “the school is a social space of practice to understand what it means to be a responsible person in society…including the development of all the human faculties of the students, together with preparation for professional life, formation of ethical and social awareness, [and] becoming aware of the transcendental, and religious education” (p.82).

According to Mulligan (2006), Catholic educational leaders need to be individuals “who will strengthen us as ‘people of community’ – committed disciples who walk in the spirit of the Beatitudes” (p. 11). Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, as written in the Gospel of Matthew, outlines aspiring attributes not only as a pathway to holiness but also as a blueprint for leadership. Sample phrases include: “blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God”, “blessed are the merciful for they shall be shown mercy”, or “blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled” (Mt 5:3-12). Such foundational characteristics give witness to the Catholic leadership role and
give expression to otherwise elusive qualities that the general public is questioning as being redundant and easily integrated within one publically funded school system. Such ambiguous language, if not articulated within a Catholic context, does not support the argument for publically funded Catholic schools. Arguably, the distinctiveness of Catholic education remains elusive. Mulligan (2006) explicitly states that:

To be a leader at this defining moment in Catholic education is indeed challenging…leaders are entrusted with not only maintaining our Catholic distinctiveness but with articulating it, clarifying it and promoting it. Leaders must be personally convinced that Catholic education is a gift to both the church and to Canadian society. (p. 14)

It is in relationship that meaningful discourse, mutual understanding, and respect is cultivated. Given that many Catholic schools have a mixture of Catholic and non-Catholic families, leaders must be deliberate in expressing the purpose, meaning, and mission of the school. Belmonte and Cranston (2009) respond to this need by reinforcing that this “transmission of a special culture must now make explicit what once was known implicitly” (p. 294). An inclusive culture of welcome must permeate the school, and this will be pivotal in developing a Catholic identity:

Catholic leaders …build communities of compassion, justice, peace, and openness to God… Leaders must see themselves first and foremost as employees of the Gospel. Animated by such leadership, (they) can build and strengthen (their) schools as communities of justice, where the dignity of each created human person is honored and the common good is served unequivocally. (Mulligan, 2006, p. 11)
Given the diverse communities that schools serve, educational leaders must be able to relate to a multitude of perspectives, beliefs, values, and morals. A ‘one size fits all’ approach no longer sustains what Rymarz (2010) terms a “capricious citizenry” (p. 303). A capricious citizen might be described as an individual who is unpredictable and subject to changes in mood or behaviour often picking and choosing according to whimsical preferences. This individual might be considered impulsive, illogical or unreasonable. In a religious context, this person might be defined as someone whose loyalty and commitment is inclined to sway rather than being steady. In all honesty, there have been times when I would be considered a capricious citizen as different contextual circumstances have influenced my behaviour, decision-making, and loyalty. For example, I find myself having an abundance of patience mentoring a new music teacher on the mass parts, whereas little patience when discussing the same topic with a veteran teacher. This might be interpreted as favouritism and unjust. Some might even stretch it to mean that my internal understanding of Catholic identity is not in sync with my outward expression. Regardless, it is important to emphasize that Catholic identity constitutes multiple expression in a variety of context.

Rymarz (2010) explains that Catholics are no longer carried along by their membership in a strong and cohesive group if it does not occupy an active part of their life. “As a result the idea that Catholics need to be shaken out of a complacency that arises from progressing through life in a relatively unreflective mode needs to be challenged” (Rymarz, 2010, p. 303). McDonough (2015) provides a counterargument to Rymarz’s notion of a singular and Catholic identity by stating, “there is evidence here that identity is being constructed as a singular entity against which persons are measured by
degrees of adherence rather than kinds of commitment” (p. 4). “Re-thinking of the educational leader’s role in terms that point away from suggestions that they are guardians of a singular identity, and seeing them instead as the coordinators of an overlapping consensus among identities” is the role of 21st century Catholic leaders (McDonough, 2015, p. 6). Such a metaphor for the articulation of Catholic identity in the plural facilitates the visualization of a Venn diagram whereby overlapping circles create space for uniqueness and commonality. Even as additional circles are added to the Venn diagram, the common core connecting all the circles serves as an anchor of connection, unity, and linkage. This visual image serves as a reference to understanding how Catholic educational leaders shape, inform, and influence their understanding of Catholic identity both individually and collectively. Given the public discourse on Catholic education as a relevant option within an every changing pluralistic 21st century society, expressing and articulating Catholic identity and how it serves the common good of a modern democratic society demands thoughtful consideration. Within the role of Catholic educational leadership this becomes relevant and timely.

Such urgency expressed by Sabe (2007), as cited in Rymarz (2010), states, “the classical model of religious socialization is now so tenuous that it needs to be replaced by a new conceptual model” (p. 303). Such a model, according to Rymarz, is to have “sufficient numbers of individuals who give concrete witness to the goals and aspirations of the institution” (p. 303). This is problematic, however, given the understanding that there are many interpretations and variations of how the Church is uniquely understood. Dulles (2002) puts forth an ecclesiology that understands the Church in a more comprehensive and broader framework, asserting that rendering the Church as exclusively
institutional is insufficient. Dulles (2002) explains, “Catholics are commonly thought to be committed to the thesis that the Church is most aptly conceived as a single, unified “perfect society”...I hold that Catholic today should not wish to defend a primarily institutional view of the Church” (p. 1). Rather, Dulles (2002) outlines six models; *Church as Institution, Church as Mystical Communion, Church as Sacrament, Church as Community of Disciples, Church as Herald, and Church as Servant.* While each model outlines varied nuances, Dulles (2002) asserts that they can “have great value in helping people to get beyond the limitations of their own particular outlook, and to enter into fruitful conversations with other having a fundamentally different mentality” (p. 4). In addition, Dulles (2002), cautions that, given the complexity of Church, one ecclesial entity cannot be adequately understood exclusively through one model. Each model has its credits limitations and perusing any one single model will lead to distortion. (p.10, 20-21, & 24). “In order to offset the defects of individual models, the theologian, like the physicist, employs a combination of irreducibly distinct models” (Dulles, 2002, p. 19).

As a result, Dulles (2002) challenges the understanding of church as a single, unified society, aligned to what he describes as *Church as Institution,* whereby structure, order, and hierarchy of power is emphasized. In such a model the historical truths of Church teachings are undeniable and “because the bishops are considered to possess a special ‘charism of truths’ the faithful are in conscience bound to believe what the bishops declare” (p. 29). This model of Church, “is not conceived as a democratic or representative society, but as one in which the fullness of power is concentrated in the hands of a ruling class that perpetuates itself by cooption” (Dulles, 2002, p. 30). Such a worldview of Church, although helpful in maintaining order and obedience within its
membership promising eternal life to all those who follow, is according to Dulles (2002) “out of phase with the demands of the times. In an age of dialogue, ecumenism, and interest in world religions, the monopolistic tendencies of this model are unacceptable” (p. 36). “Dulles does not erase the institutional model, but rather returns it to a humble standing along other valid expressions” (McDonough, 2015, p. 2).

Dulles (2002) suggests tempering the institutional model of church by considering the model of *Church as Mystical Communion*. This model aligns with the mission of Catholic schools as inclusive places of welcome. Within this model, the Church is understood as an informal community of people who have a private, spiritual, and evolving relationship with God. Dulles asserts that this model of Church, “is a great community made up of many interlocking communities. Thanks to the unifying presence of the Holy Spirit, the many families of Christians are woven into a single large family” (p. 48). *Church as Sacrament*, according to Dulles (2002) “has both an outer and an inner aspect” (p. 59). Within this ecclesiology, the Church is not just a sign but understood as a sacrament. “Wherever the grace of Christ is present, it is in search of a visible form that adequately expresses what it is. In this perspective the Church may be defined as the association of men that palpably bears witness to the true nature and meaning of grace as God’s gift in Jesus Christ” (Dulles, 2002, p. 63). Dulles (2002) model of *Church as Herald* differs from *Church as Sacrament*, “because it makes the “word” primary and the “sacrament” secondary” (p. 68). This ecclesiology “looks upon the Church as herald-one who receives an official message with the commission to pass it on” (Dulles, 2002, p. 68). Evangelization and preaching of the gospel “gives a clear sense of identity and mission to the Church-especially the local church-as a congregation that heralds the good news of
Jesus Christ and sets its face against all idolatry” (Dulles, 2002, p. 76). It is within the model of *Church as Servant*, that Dulles (2002) explains, the Church seeks to find “a new relevance, a new vitality, a new modernity, and a new sense of mission” (p. 90). Dulles (2002) states that within this ecclesiology, “the Church takes the world as a properly theological locus, and seeks to discern the sign of the times” (p. 82).

While each model has its own values and limitation, the model of *Church as Community of Disciples* resonates with the understanding that Jesus Christ is the reason for Catholic schools. Dulles (2002) illuminates by explaining, “At a time when the general culture gives little support to Christian values, it is particularly important for the Church to visualize itself, as it originally did, as a contrast society. The discipleship model motivates the members of the church to imitate Jesus in their personal lives. It makes them feel at home in a Church that must always find its way in a rapidly changing and fluid situation.” (p.213). Such a model does present drawbacks. Dulles (2002) notes, “the discipleship models seems to make excessive demands on the average Christian...now as in the day of Jesus, would seem to be a special vocation given only to a minority within the general community of believers” (p. 216).

It becomes important to consider, as Dulles (2002) states, that “the various paradigm brings with it its own values, certitudes, commitments, and priorities. It even brings with it a particular set of preferred problems” (p. 22). Within a school community, it becomes important for the Catholic educational leader to nurture and honour the diversity of its members and their understanding of Church. Acknowledging and working within diverse ecclesial models allows Catholic educational leaders the opportunity to contemplate a richer understanding of Church allowing “people to get beyond the
limitations of their own particular outlook, and to enter into fruitful conversation with others having a fundamentally different mentality” (Dulles, 2002, p. 5). Within such a culture, Catholic identity is formed authentically and affirms the understanding that life experiences are central to one’s faith formation creating a culture that “fosters the kind of pluralism that heals and unifies, rather than a pluralism that divides and destroys” (p. 5).

Ultimately, imitating and giving witness to the teachings of Jesus is the credibility educational leaders seek to model and articulate in their school community. It becomes necessary to confidently assert, with detailed intent, how Jesus Christ shapes the culture of a school in the 21st century. As Rymarz (2016) suggests, “passive acceptance of Catholic identity is likely to become increasingly problematic” (p. 307). Such a problematic situation arose when Catholic schools become a political matter in Alberta, as the government imposed policy expectations rectifying what they felt was the need to address the inadequacies in providing safe and caring learning. Through this discourse, the narrative that Catholic schools were exclusive, discriminatory, and unwilling to accept LGBTQ students gained momentum. It became evident that Catholic educational leaders, who claimed to serve both the faith and the state, were unable to defend Catholic education because they did not have the lived experience of Catholic education and were unable to articulate how Catholic education serves the common good and how it contributes to a 21st century democratic society. Ironically, leaders are often entrusted to write policies that govern entire Catholic school districts sometimes without any basis of legitimate experience or theological knowledge. There exist even those who are simply looking to the role as Catholic educational leader as a stepping-stone to further their own
political career with no long-term loyalty to Catholic education. One nine year Catholic
Trustee in Alberta publicly stated on social media that she believes God to be out-dated
and that God can be experienced in nature thus making it unnecessary to attend Church.
This individual went as far as suggesting that the Bible is out-dated and a 21st century
version is necessary to adequately meet the needs of the modern world. As Rymarz
warns, not only are such educational leaders ill informed to defend Catholic education,
their leadership position becomes caustic. Catholic educational leaders should perhaps
consider a more collaborative approach to discourse articulated with a respectful
disposition and with sincere interest in furthering the understanding of Catholic education
within a 21st century worldview. It is problematic when difference of opinion is expressed
in a confrontational, defensive, or dogmatic tone as it could result in further divisiveness
with little resolve. Such a stance could prove limiting as tensions are often unavoidable
when trying to understand the complexities of one’s own Catholic identity in relationship
to Church teachings and the diverse experiences of others making it necessary to broaden
the understanding of Catholic identity, as suggested by McDonough (2016), “to include
reliance on the ecclesial models of Church as proposed by Dulles” (p. 8).

Schuttlof fel (2013) warns that as “Catholic school leaders struggle to seek a
balance between the positive and negative external influences on their schools, (they must
remain vigilant) to government funds as a type of golden handcuff” (p. 98). As a
“cautionary tale” Schuttlof fel (2013) reminds us that government funding and political
decisions are not without commensurate demands and intrusions. (p. 98). Mulligan (2016)
advises Catholic educational leaders, in relationship with the Catholic community, to
“come together to tell our Catholic Christian story and our Catholic education story, and
can give weight and direction and meaning in a practical and organizational way to what we are about. We must look to this core group to maintain our difference. From this core group others might be influenced to understand what we are about” (Personal conversation, February, 2016).

Given the diversity of our school community in our current post-modern and secular age, it is incumbent on educational leaders to give witness to authentic Catholic identities rather than to a prescribed static and univocal identity that no longer proves to be meaningful, relevant, or legitimate. This appears in direct contraction of Rymarz’s view of capriciousness as overt disloyalty to the faith. Students, staff, and community need to witness an authentic and genuine articulation of Catholic values, traditions, and beliefs in all aspects of school life. It becomes incumbent on the leader of Catholic schools to model this in word, deed, and action understanding that living in the post-modern world nictitates knowing Jesus Christ, his teachings, mission, and leadership.

Ultimately, Groome explains that leaders must create the school identity around Jesus Christ’s; teachings, mission, and leadership. Catholic leaders must inspire and instil a profound and deep universal faith that persuades and compels others to give witness to Jesus Christ as a source of grace, mercy, and hope (Groome, conversation, November 4, 2014). While public schools might strive to instil similar attributes in their students they do not recognize or reference Jesus Christ as the ultimate role model for such qualities within a contemplative and critical framework. Mulligan (2006) continues to challenge the integrity of Catholic educational leaders by saying:

There is too much hypocrisy at the top…this does not bode well for our future.

The lack of authenticity is so obvious to the teaching staff. If those who you work
for do not exemplify gospel values, yet repeatedly appeal to gospel values to make you accountable…it does not take too long for teachers to question the authority and credibility of their leaders. (p.128)

Lowney (2013) recommends, “we need new ways of reimagining leadership and better ways of preparing ourselves and others to lead” (p. 3). Those in leadership positions, according to Lowney (2013):

Seem preoccupied only with their own status or income. They are unable to inspire or unite us; they are not imaginative enough to solve the seemingly intractable problems that plague us; they are afraid to make tough choices or even to level with us; and they are insufficiently courageous to lead us thorough challenge and drive change. (p. 3)

Schuttloffel (2012) states that from a Catholic context, the “leading population has experienced a poor theological knowledge base (due to being a) product of a softer, less dogmatic, more ecumenical, religious education following Vatican II” (p. 151).

Schuttloffel’s interpretation suggests that poor theology produces a more ecumenical leadership stance. Theology and ecumenism are not in tension; rather theology informs ecumenism by emphasizing good general practices of living regardless of whether they are specifically linked to Church teachings. The Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegration*, is one such document emphasizing the relationship among Christians who seek greater unity amongst one another. It calls to holiness all people who long for the one visible Church of God stemming from the desire, albeit in different ways, for conversion and commitment to the Gospel of peace. This unity is achieved under the action of the Holy Spirit evoking harmony within the family of God. It stands to reason
that Catholic educational leaders are called to bring unity within their school and community. Given the diversity, unity becomes a critical component in building a welcoming and inclusive school culture.

For Catholic educational school principals, who are entrusted with the responsibility of spiritual, curricular, financial, and cultural formation of the school a dogmatic tone versus an ecumenical approach, could be problematic given the diversity of students both Catholic and non-Catholic. Compounding the weak preparation for spiritual leadership and increased leadership demands on principals, one might be inclined to conclude that Catholic educational leaders have a difficult time living out their understood Catholic identity, given the complexity of their ill-prepared role. Bibby and Miller (2014) warn, “administrators in particular need to be relational leaders in faith and not ‘checklist Catholics’: a term which seems to suggest that some go through the outward appearances of faith but do not live out the Catholic worldview” (p. 23). Schutolloffel, acknowledging a deficit in theology and equating it to ecumenism, suggests an insular view of defending the faith that aligns with Dulles model of Church as Institution. Such a position requires the acceptance of a corporate identity that views any variance as problematic. Within this model, Catholic identity is characterized as a uniform, univocal, and singular notion of expression and understanding rated as either adequate or inadequate in accordance to what is deemed worthy theological knowledge.

Thus given the diversity of individuals, the multitude of interpretations of leadership, and the weak preparation for faith formation it becomes undeniably essential for Catholic administrators to contemplate their lived experience in relation to shaping, informing, and influencing Catholic identity in 21st century schools. This requires a
deliberate and conscious approach. Even with the best of intentions, it may be difficult for Catholic educational leaders to envision how to engage in authentic Catholic educational purposing, fostering and nurturing a Catholic school identity, and enacting their own Catholic identity in a professional setting. One must remain hopeful that the opportunity to explore and create new Catholic narratives, which speak to a diverse audience, might emerge, serving to empower and validate the spiritual formation of Catholic leaders in constructive ways. Belmonte and Cranston (2009) suggest that it is time to explore, “how lay principals in Catholic schools, in this complex and changing context, perceive their role in promoting a Catholic culture and character” (p. 297). Also, the complexity of writing an inclusive policy in Alberta is clearly synthesized by Belmonte and Cranston (2009):

Catholic schools must prove their validity as viable education institutions, as well as satisfying the requirements of the Church, while simultaneously responding to government accountability and to Church expectations. Their identity as Catholic schools is fundamental to their existence, and when they cease to be Catholic, for all purposes, they cease to exist. (p. 296)

Consequently:

Principals play a prime role in determining the quality and the future of Catholic schools…in an era of unprecedented social, economic, and ecclesial change, their greatest challenge is preserving and enhancing the school’s Catholic character and culture for future generations. (Belmonte and Cranston, 2009, p. 313)

Being a Catholic educational leader in the midst of such unprecedented change becomes increasingly daunting. My research question, which aims to explore the lived experience
of Catholic educational leaders in relation to shaping, informing, and influencing Catholic identity in 21st century schools, has potential to provide insight into the thoughts and reflections of educational leaders serving both in Catholic and Public schools.

**The Concept of a Catholic Identity**

Catholics believe that humans are created in the image and likeness of God and are worthy of a loving dignity and mercy that is unconditional and everlasting. Catholic schools, according to Miller (2006), teach from this “specific view of the human person as a child of God destined for eternal life...at their very best, Catholic schools prepare their students, in the words of Benedict XVI, ‘to be saints’” (pp.18-19). Our humanness, therefore, being a temporary condition, is only to serve the ultimate purpose of our eternal life in Heaven. Our common Catholic identity stems from this understanding of the inherent dignity of every human person. This dignity is not conditional and does not base its worth on any pre-existing criteria. As such, our identity grows out of this understanding and continues to be influenced across multiple landscapes. Arbuckle (2014), using the work of Jenkins (1993), explains how, “self-identity is constituted by a reflexive ordering of self-narratives. Through storytelling individuals write and rewrite the story of their selves and the many worlds in which they live” (p. 4). For example, we are born into a certain identity such as ethnicity, however, “it takes work to become…Catholic” (Feinberg, 2006, p. 102). Thus understanding Catholic identity as a dynamic entity requires our understanding of self to be, “forever negotiated –for we can amend and edit the remembered past to fit with our identities and the context at the present moment” (Arbuckle, 2014, p. 5). Feinberg (2006) explains that to “take on a religious identity entails learning to perform certain practices, coming to understand their
meaning, and learning to accept certain beliefs as one’s own” (pp. 102-103). Within this unified and cohesive understanding of Catholic identity, it is important to remain mindful of Arbuckle’s (2013) advice that “our identity if far from unitary; rather, we all have a multiplicity of identities, and often there are tensions, even conflicts, between our different identities” (p. 2).

Pilarczyk (2006) explains, “Those who profess the Catholic faith have a particular mindset. It is a mindset that includes attitudes about the world, about the people around them, about possessions, prayer and spiritual maturity that grow out of their faith and color the way they think” (p. vii). Catholic faith, according to Pilarczyk (2006) is not about an individual randomly constructing a generic selection of beliefs but “of believing Catholic…of believing as the church believes, of believing as Christ taught” (p. vii). Catholic identity requires an understanding of the teachings of Christ and responding to these teaching in our own life story. Pilarczyk (2006), referencing the sacraments as understood from Dulles model of the Church as institution, states:

We Catholics hold certain beliefs about God and religion. We believe that there are three persons in God, that Jesus Christ is both divine and human, that there are seven sacraments, that the pope is the head of the church. We accept these statements as true, even if we can’t prove them scientifically, even if we’re not sure of their full meaning. (p. 5)

The Catholic school should be filled with a spirit of trust, a willingness to collaborate and cooperate, and a sincerity of living a life of faithful witness founded on Catholic teachings of Christ. It is precisely by giving witness that we are able to enact “values such as compassion, respect for the dignity of the person, and justice” (Arbuckle, 2013, p. xiii).
Such values are not limited to strictly a Catholic philosophy; Feinberg (2006) reminds us “religious groups of all kinds are forcefully asserting that religion should play a central role in the moral education of children in public schools” (p. xi). One might question how such Catholic school characteristics differ from public schools. Feinberg (2006) explains this very query by using the example of a bigger child pushing a smaller child. Feinberg (2006) states:

In a secular school, the teacher might ask the bully, who pushes a smaller child, ‘How would you like it if I pushed you?’ and hope that she can establish a sense of reciprocity. In a religious school, the teacher might ask, ‘How would Jesus feel?’ hoping to connect the child’s sentiments to a wider religious community and thus center his activity beyond himself. The child is asked to consider his action not from the standpoint of himself but from the standpoint of a loving being (Jesus) who cares about us all. (p. 11)

What does it mean to have a Catholic identity within a school community? According to Miller (2006), the ultimate indicator of a school’s Catholic identity is through the vital witness of its teachers and administrators (p.53). If we are to maintain our Catholic school identity, Arbuckle (2013) suggests leaders need to set forth very clear expectations and recognize that they “have the right to require their staffs to behave in accordance with gospel values and the ethical and social principles of the Catholic Church” (Arbuckle, 2013, p. xiii). In Alberta, the Catholicity Clause was embedded in teacher contracts in 2009. The provisions of this clause outline that teachers will:

Undertake to follow, both in and out of school, a lifestyle and deportment in harmony with Catholic Church practices and beliefs, which include, among other
things, participating in the Sacraments of the Church and living in harmony with the principles of the Gospel and Teachings of the Catholic Church. (Feehan, 2015)

Feehan (2008) explains his colloquial understanding of public and separate schools by stating, “public and separate schools are based upon fundamentally different approaches to education. Public schools see the separation of secular from religious education as being advantageous. In contrast, separate school supporters believe that religious instruction and values should permeate and be integral to the teaching of secular subjects” (p. 1). It is important to note that at the time of Feehan’s writing, St. Albert’s Catholic schools were the Public, majority schools. Regardless, Catholic education as a humanizing way of educating children is not only philosophical, but also pedagogical in terms of how Catholicity is permeated in each of the subject areas. After referencing multiple sources such as Code of Canon Law, Second Vatican Council (1962-5), and Congregation for Catholic Education, Pope John Paul II, and Archbishop Pilarczyk, Feehan (2001) marks six defining characteristics, from a constitutional perspective, distinguishing Catholic from public schools:

A Catholic school must have Christ as the foundation of the whole enterprise…
A Catholic school is one in which Catholic education is established, directed, recognized or consented to by the local Bishop or competent ecclesiastical authority…
A Catholic school must strive to develop the total and integral formation of the individual in the image of Christ…
A Catholic school is one in which there is a goal of synthesis and integration of culture and faith, and synthesis and integration of faith and life…
A Catholic school must form a community with the parents, recognizing that the parents are always the primary
educators of their children….and a Catholic school is one in which religion and catechism permeate every aspect of the school day and in which all school programming is implemented within an overall religious perspective. (p.1) A distinct Catholic education challenges educators to instil in students a critical social consciousness, a respect for diversity, and the impetus to work towards a common good. Such characteristics not only serve society, but also the Church and they do so in three distinct ways. First, they develop an ecclesial identity whereby students feel connected to God’s family of all humankind; secondly, students become active and contributing members according to their charisms and circumstances; and third, they foster social consciousness by encouraging students to become appreciative of the Church’s assets and critical of its shortcomings (Groome, 1998, p. 195). Miller (2006), urges Catholic educators to remain wakeful in “safeguarding and promoting a Catholic school ethos” (p. 6).

When speaking of a Catholic school ethos, Miller (2006) puts forth five defining characteristics that make Catholic schools recognizably distinct from their public counterparts. These five benchmarks are essential to understanding Catholic identity: inspiration by a supernatural vision, founded on a Christian anthropology, animated by communion and community, imbued with a Catholic worldview throughout the curriculum, and sustained by gospel witness (Miller, 2006, p. 17). Miller (2006) expounds, “these benchmarks help to answer the critical question: Is this a Catholic school according to the mind of the Church?” (p. 17). Additionally, Miller expounds that these five benchmarks are measurable and form the backbone of every Catholic school by articulating and strengthening Catholic identity. It is interesting to note that Miller wrote
about the five benchmarks of Catholic identity in 2006 but these were not implemented until 2015 in Alberta. This suggests that Catholic educational leaders were either not cognizant of the benchmarks until 2015, or they deliberately postponed consideration as they did not rank as being a priority.

Schuttloffel (2012) explains that Catholic school leaders are “confronted by a technological-secular-consumerist culture (which) leads to a profound tension between contemporary culture and lived experiences” (p. 152). As a result of these tensions, Schuttloffel (2012) concludes that ‘school leaders’ understanding of Catholic identity is not predictable or based on a universal belief” (p. 152). According to Schuttloffel (2012), a Catholic leader’s character is shaped by experiences within multiple communities, cultures, and contexts. Given this diversity, Catholic leaders should consider adopting a contemplative and reflective practice. Within this model, Catholic educational leaders are able to reflect upon the impact of how “community culture plays an important role in shaping the character of a school leader and ultimately his or her ability to create a faith learning community within their school” (p. 153). No longer can we view culture as a unifying, unchanging, and homogenizing force, but rather, according to Arbuckle (2013), “in our postmodern world individual identity is less and less a question of conforming to definite, set roles and more and more an issue of trying to make sense of who I am through monitoring my own actions, depending on the ever-changing social environment in which I find myself” (p. 4). We cannot, as Catholics, be paralyzed by a stereotypical, preconceived, clichéd version of identity and settle into static and conforming roles. Rather, as Arbuckle (2013) advises, we must come to understand that “individuals have a multiplicity of potential identities because the context in which they are living, working,
and recreating is continually changing…identity (therefore) is always a process of ‘being’ or ‘becoming’ never a final and settled issue” (p. 3). McDonough (2015) concurs with the notion of multiple Catholic identities and “contends that any proposal concerning Catholic school culture and identity is at best limited unless a plurality of Catholic identities is acknowledged” (p. 1). This provokes a paradigm shift from a limited and singular conception of Catholic identity to acknowledging possibilities for multiple Catholic identities addressing diversity. According to McDonough (2015), “It might also mean a re-thinking of the educational leader’s role in terms that point away from suggestions that they are guardians of a singular identity, and seeing themselves instead as the coordinators of an overlapping consensus among identities” (p. 6).

According to Groome (2014), there appears to be a temptation of “downplaying the Catholic identity of our schools. [Rather] we must renew [our] grounding in Catholic faith and enhance our distinctiveness for this now ‘secular age’” (p. 2). According to Belmonte and Cranston (2009):

Within the changing context of Church, society, and school…a special culture must now make explicit what once was known implicitly. If Catholic schools are to carry out the work for which they were established, the processes through which their distinctive ethos or spirit are transmitted to each generation need to be understood better. (p. 294)

My research question, seeking to understand what is the lived experience of Catholic educational leaders in relation to shaping, informing, and influencing the conceptual formation of Catholic identity in 21st century school communities, bears significance for
Catholic education as they strive to articulate the distinctiveness, relevance, and importance to various stakeholders.

As cited in Rymarz (2010), Smith and Snell (2009) explain, “many Catholics lack an identity that makes them different or distinctive from others in the general culture” (p. 302). Rymarz (2010) maintains that:

Catholic schools in Canada face significant challenges in maintaining Catholic identity due to changes in the wider culture. These changes make strong religious commitment much more problematic and, in turn, this impacts the ability of Catholic schools to maintain a vibrant and distinctive sense of religious identity. (p. 300)

Such an explanation positions the research question of this study within the inquiry space of acknowledging the difficulty of articulating the distinctiveness of Catholic educational leadership within a 21st century context. These challenges continue to add layers of complexity to Catholic identity as a dynamic and evolving phenomenon. Catholic schools, given the diversity of both student and staff, endeavour to fuse modern day culture with church teachings, in a manner that remains respectful and welcoming. Thus the intent of this study is to peel away the layers and reveal how Catholic identity is shaped, informed, and influenced through the lived experience of four Catholic educational leaders as they lead such diverse learning communities.
Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

Narrative Inquiry, Methodology

“Since the late 1980s/early 1990s, social science researchers have taken a narrative turn in understanding experience. It was during this time that researchers began to specifically develop a research methodology called narrative inquiry” (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013, p. 574). Sparkes and Smith (2014) state, “while there is no one singular definition of what narrative research is, a common thread is the assumption that our lives are storied and that the self is narratively constructed” (p. 25). Clandinin (2013) builds on this understanding reminding researchers that, “stories are lived before they are told…our turn to narrative comes through our interest in understanding experiential knowledge” (p. 10). Clandinin (2013) explains:

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. (p.13)

It is important to understand that:

Narrative inquiry is an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honouring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding. Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is collaborative between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. (p.17)

Therefore, narrative inquiry works within a relational three-dimensional space with temporality, sociality, and place as key considerations. It is in the living, telling, retelling,
and reliving that stories of experience are understood. According to Sparkes and Smith (2014), “while there is no one singular definition of what narrative inquiry is, a common thread is the assumption that our lives are storied and that the self is narratively constructed” (p. 46). “Narratives provide a structure for our very sense of selfhood and identity. Therefore, as we tell stories about our lives to ourselves and to others so we create a narrative identity” (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 46). This sense of storied self helps establish an understanding of life events and continuity providing a sense of unity, coherence, and purpose. Narrative identity, therefore, “provide(s) a structure for our very sense of selfhood and identity. Therefore as we tell stories about our lives to ourselves and others so we create a narrative identity” (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 25).

Sparkes and Smith (2014) explain, “narrative researchers…focus on the stories told by people about their experiences (based on the assumption that) lives are storied and that the self is narratively constructed” (p. 46). Narrative inquiry is grounded in the following epistemological and ontological understandings:

1. Human beings actively construct meaning.
2. Meaning is created through stories.
3. Meaning is achieved in relationship with others because humans are relational beings.
4. Narratives are both personal and social.
5. Identities are constructed through narratives.
6. Being human is to live in and through time, organizing experiences of temporality.
7. The body is a storyteller, and narratives are embodied.

(Sparkes and Smith, 2014, pp. 46-47).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain how narrative inquiry is firmly grounded in the work of John Dewey. “For Dewey, education, experience, and life are intertwined…the study of education is the study of life…we learn about education from thinking about life, and we learn about life from thinking about education” (p. xxiv). Therefore, “to engage deeply with experience, an ontological commitment is, then, a relational commitment. It is a commitment to a form of togetherness in research that seeks to explore how we are living in the midst of our stories” (Clandinin et al., 2013, p. 576). Consequently:

A narrative ontology implies that experiences are continuously interactive; resulting in changes in both people and the contexts in which they interact …an inquiry is established because there is a curiosity about how people are living and the constituents of their experience. (Clandinin et al., 2013, p. 575-76)

Narratives change, as life experiences enable or force us to re-interpret events. It is from the telling and retelling of stories that meaning is derived from past events, embodied in the present, and expressed into the future. Trying to make sense of experience is easily understood when life events are predictable and fit into the storied script of oneself. However, when events happen that are unpredictable, confusing, or pose a significant challenge, it is much more difficult to integrate these diverse experiences in a unified and purposeful manner. Developing coherence in identity for the Catholic educational leader becomes a complex puzzle requiring constructing and reconstructing meaning.

Schuttloffel (2013) explains the foundational importance of coherence when constructing a Catholic leadership identity by stating, “coherence between a leader’s
beliefs and actions create credibility within a school community and fosters its Catholic identity” (p. 82). What enables this coherence is maturity in understanding varied life experiences and the ability to connect practice to faith in an authentic manner.

Schutloffel (2013) states, “this coherence between identity and practice serves to create a school culture supportive of developing Catholic identity within students, teachers, and other members of the school community” (p.89). Clandinin (2013) describes continuity and coherence as an ontological matter by stating:

Narrative inquirers understand [coherence and] continuity, as an ontological matter. Experiences are continuous...what you see, hear, feel, think, love, taste, despise, fear is what you get. That is all we intimately have in which to ground our understanding. And that is all we need…inquiry is within a stream of experience that generates new relations that then becomes a part of future experience. (pp.16-17)

“In narrative inquiry, stories are not just a medium of learning, development, or transformation, but also a life” (Clandinin et al., 2013, p. 578). This life storyline, according to Carr (1986) “requires active reflection that attempts to put the whole together” (p. 75). The researcher and the participant each enter the inquiry, bringing their own personal experiences, thoughts, memories, and observations. Within my research conversations with participants, I co-created a space that provided insight to my research question and allowed participants to construct meaning from their own lived experience as a Catholic educational leader. According to Johnson (2009), “people construct identities through their talk in interactions with other” (p. 270).
“Truth be told, our lives are quite complicated” (Dunlop and Walker, 2013, p. 235). They explain that life is full of contradictions and conflict resulting in “… a collection of roles, responsibilities, and characteristics that may or may not be consonant with one another” (p. 235). Because life and experience is in a constant state of change, to construct a sense of identity is a complicated matter. Further, “identity…is an inner story of the self that integrates the reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future to provide a life with unity, purpose, and meaning” (Dunlop and Walker, 2013, p. 236). Over time, life experiences and our understanding of these experiences form this inner story.

Because our lives are complicated and complex, given the diversity of experiences on a personal, social, spiritual, and professional level, Bateson (1994) postulates that this may lead to times of uncertainty. She speaks of improvisation as a necessary means in which we navigate our ever-changing landscape of life during such times. “More and more lives today [are in] uncertainty, full of the inklings of alternatives…adaptation comes out of encounters with novelty that may seem chaotic” (Bateson, 1994, p. 8). According to Bateson (1994), improvisation is necessary as we try to understand and articulate our identities in changing landscapes. “A landscape metaphor allows us to talk about space, place, and time. Further it has a sense of expansiveness and the possibility of being filled with diverse people, things, and events in different relationships” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 4). As we encounter new experiences we must imagine and reimagine our sense of purpose within these diverse communities. We must in fact try to create “a story to live by” as we strive to build bridges of continuity and understanding between our ever-changing world; the different landscapes which shape our life story.
“Stories to live by are those stories that dwell in a person’s heart, that a person is committed to, and those that a person authors or co-authors” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 37). Stories to live by help us weave threads of coherence and continuity between the stories that tell of our personal landscape, our professional landscape and our spiritual landscape. Bateson (1994) states that when individuals encounter a situation that is unfamiliar, they should not withdraw until they feel prepared, but rather continue to play with a partial understanding and learn along the way; improvise by constructing a story to live by. As Catholic educational leaders, it becomes necessary to improvise given the wide scope of unfamiliar responsibilities or conflicting perspectives. When trying to align faith with decision-making, creating a story to live by gives temporary justification for doing what you are doing. For example, I have had to improvise while making decisions on whether or not to enrol non-Catholic students in my schools. I have felt tension trying to balance inclusivity with distinctiveness. Questions of how a Catholic leader goes about negotiating the distinctiveness of Catholic education whilst respecting the faith of other students arise. These are difficult situations to experience, articulate, and resolve. This is not easy given that policy and practice are not always aligned since lived experience in an educational community is always negotiated in accordance with varying conditions. Bateson (1994) suggests, “insight, I believe, refers to that depth of understanding that comes by setting experiences, yours and mine, familiar and exotic, new and old, side by side” (p. 14). Stories to live by allow life to be experienced as a story rather than isolated events over time. The philosopher Carr (1986) writes, “what is significant in their pasts, what they value in the present and what they intend to do in the
future…is that out of these experiences, people create their own stories to live by…their identity” (p. 90).

How an individual gathers these stories and comes to understand critical life moments where faith is challenged, or questioned, or disregarded, could have a profound effect on how one understands and works within their role as a Catholic leader. Wells (2015), explains:

The power of stories is that people can see themselves in them. Statistics have their place in seeking clarity, but wisdom comes from another place inside us. It was author John Shea who said that stories begin as a window through which you observe someone else’s life. If you listen to the story properly, he says, it ceases to be a window and becomes a mirror. Once that change happens: “You aren’t telling the story, the story is telling you. (p. 15)

It is the sincere intent of my research to empower Catholic educational leaders to articulate their understanding of Catholic educational leadership and how these insights will contribute to the diverse narrative of Catholic education on an ever-changing political and social landscape. The inquiry, specifically situated in the exploration of how Catholic identity is shaped, formed, and influenced facilitates the discourse of how it is viewed and articulated within a 21st century contextual lens.

**Responding to the Research Question: Methods / Participants**

My research objective established themes of understanding in response to my research question: What is the lived experience of Catholic educational leaders in relation to shaping, informing, and influencing the conceptual formation of Catholic identity in 21st century schools? The intent was to have Catholic educational leaders tell their stories
of experience and articulate how these stories have influenced their leadership role and Catholic identity. Given the increased secularization of society, the tension of whether Catholic schools should continue to exist within a publicly funded model, and the complexity of Catholic identity within the leadership role, this research provided the opportunity to explore and create new Catholic narratives of understanding for Catholic educational leaders.

In keeping with narrative inquiry methodology, I collected conversational text, field notes, artefacts, photos, journals, autobiographical reflective writing and memory box items as data. Stories shared by participants provided a lens to better understand how different life experiences shape, inform, and influence Catholic identity in 21st century Catholic schools. Because narrative inquiry is a collaborative methodology between researcher and participants, I strived to create a safe space of inquiry grounded on mutual respect, trust, and rapport. Given the complexity of Catholic educational leadership, it is important to give authentic and diverse voice to the stories of experience participants will share. As Gergen (2014) suggests, “the kind of story a person generally tells about some period in his or her life can have dramatic consequences for that person’s well-being” (p. 6). As summarized by Clandinin & Connelly (2000) “we need to be thoughtful of our research participants as our first audience, and indeed, our most important audience, for it is them that we owe our care to compose a text that does not rupture life stories, but sustains them” (p. 174). Within this context, it remained important to engage in critical discussion for creating a space where differences of lived experience was respected yet challenged for the purpose of revealing new understanding. Building rapport with participants, over time, contributed to the rich dialogue and provided concrete examples
of Catholic leadership in action and with thoughtful reaction. Rupturing a participant’s life story, as explained by Clandinin and Connelly, could prove counterproductive for data collection.

I served as a participant in this study; however I limited my conversation time so as to ensure participants received full opportunity to express themselves. As a result, I conducted four to six semi-structured conversational interviews with four participants, each one lasting no longer than two hours (or as agreed upon by the participants at the time). This format aligned with Clandinin’s statements regarding (2005) conversational data, allowing “researcher and participants to co-construct data by sharing their experiences. Conversations or dialogue shifts the power differential between researcher and participants to a more mutual, equally vulnerable relationship” (p. 210). The first conversation with each participant established rapport and relationship. This initial meeting facilitated a casual conversation about my research question and an invitation to recall and share our beginnings as Catholic educational leaders. Gradually we conversed specifically about their lived experience as a Catholic educational leader and how it informed their Catholic conceptual formation of Catholic identity.

Participants were invited to keep a reflective journal for the duration of the research project. The reflective journal allowed the participants to reflect on our conversations and record any emerging challenges, additionally allowing participants to respond to the research question in the context of their lived reality. Also, memories, feelings, and thoughts, were recorded which might otherwise have been dismissed. These details added richness to the study, making it more believable, persuasive and realizing verisimilitude. Focus questions (see Appendix) were used to stimulate and guide
conversation surrounding Catholic leadership in subsequent interviews. As explained by Cooper & Heck (1995), “As principals’ stories are retold and relived through the process of reflection, they serve to educate both teller and listener (p. 197).

There were two female participants, including myself, and three male participants, in an attempt to address gender variances. I weaved my stories as a Catholic educational leader alongside those of my participants, being mindful of not dominating the conversation. I felt it important that the participants lead the conversation and express themselves without reserve. I strove to make meaning of my own Catholic identity and how that identity has influenced my leadership of a 21st century Catholic school community. I remained mindful that “the connection between the self and study are often powerful forces in shaping many aspects of the research process, from the topic selection to the way data are reported and how these are interpreted” (Sparkes & Smith, 2015, p. 19). I heeded the advice of Etherington (2004) and adapted a reflexive stance throughout my study (p. 21). Etherington (2004) “proposes that keeping a reflexive research journal or diary can help researchers focus on their internal responses to being a researcher and enable them to capture their changing and developing understanding of method and content” (p. 21). Given that Catholic education in Alberta is at the forefront of public discussion and under close public scrutiny, participants engaged deeply in the inquiry due to the timeliness of the research and their personal commitment to the topic of inquiry. I extended an invitation to all participants to engage in a conversational focus group setting, after reviewing the narratives they had shared in previous interviews, in order to heighten the learning and deepen the understanding in a collaborative manner. Sparkes and Smith (2014) explain the benefits of focus groups to facilitate:
A lively collective interaction [bringing] forth more spontaneous, expressive, and emotional views…allow for dynamic dialogue…and control over the direction and content of the discussions…and create spaces in which participants challenge, extend, develop and undermine themselves and others in ways that allow for the proliferation of different perspectives as well, as well as… allowing unarticulated norms and normative assumptions to be revealed…[finally] the possibility for both individual and group empowerment and change is enhanced. (p. 87)

Unfortunately the possibility of a focus group was not realized given personal circumstances that unexpectedly happened. Such is the reality of research and the flexibility required conducting it.

There are no known or anticipated risks in participating in this research. Participation was completely voluntary. Pseudonyms were used and identified as such. The names of school districts of employment were also changed into pseudonyms so as not to be identifiable. Member checking, at the completion of each draft, was conducted via email and face-to-face discussion. A consideration for the protection of participants from any harm that might come from being associated with this research, given that they are sharing personal stories of faith, remained at the forefront of my research practices.

**Participant Selection**

Participants in this study had at least five years of principal experience leading a Catholic school community. It was critical that participants identified themselves as being a practicing Catholic employed as an educational leader in either a school or a school district. This condition ensured that there was lived experience, important to narrative inquiry, from which stories were shared and understanding co-created. “For narrative
inquirers, it is crucial to be able to articulate relationship between one’s personal interests and sense of significance and larger social concerns expressed in the works and lives of others” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 122). The participants’ present roles included principal, assistant superintendent with principal experience, or superintendent with principal experience. In addition, careful consideration for participant selection was their commitment to the research question. There was genuine interest to engage in the inquiry of Catholic educational leadership and how it shapes, informs, and influences Catholic identity/identities in 21st century schools.

As explained by Sparkes & Smith (2014), “participant sampling in qualitative research is best described as purposive or purposeful, in which an attempt is made to gain as much knowledge as possible about the context…researchers choose an individual, (or) a number of individuals in whom they have an interest, and who they feel will provide ‘information rich’ cases, based on them having specific characteristics” (p. 70). For the purpose of this study, participants were selected using criterion-based sampling. Participants not only had particular characteristics but also had specific experience that would provide in-depth and relevant information aligned to understanding the research inquiry. This led to participant selection based on:

- Self-identification as a practicing Catholic
- Having worked/or currently working as a Principal in Catholic schools for a minimum of five years
- No personal/professional relationship with me as the researcher; rather a professional acquaintance.
Participant selection was critically important in this study given the context of the research question. Without pre-established participant credibility, such as experience, education, and commitment to the research question, data collected could prove to be misleading or irrelevant. Sometimes the data is surprising given the unique context of experience for each participant. It is in the analysis of the data where this is revealed. Because the lived experiences are foundational to narrative inquiry methodology, stories to live by, as described by Clandinin et al. “as a narrative term conceptualized to understand the interconnectedness of knowledge, context and identity” (p. 18) contribute to the intimate understanding of Catholic leadership. Lytle (2008) uses the example of the medical profession to illustrate this important consideration. She speaks of how surgeons exceed their own expectations by inventing new solutions to problems no one outside the situation could ever envision. This kind of diligence, Lytle (2008) explains, “is only possible on the ground, by people who know the situation intimately, and who have taken on personal and professional responsibility for human betterment” (p. 375). One is seeking to understand the complexity of Catholic educational leadership if one has actively been involved in the role. For example, without witnessing how non-Catholic students are welcomed and accommodated, it would be difficult to even imagine it possible. The lived experience becomes a point of inquiry where common ground may be established while honouring unique and distinctive features. In contrast, someone who is not a leader could also seek to understand its complexity, while leaders themselves, could remain oblivious to the particulars of the role. Regardless, the purpose of this study remains firmly situated in the lived experience of four Catholic educational leaders seeking to understand Catholic leadership and identity personally, professionally, and
socially within the context of the familiar and unfamiliar. As such, the participants were experienced as Catholic educational leaders both at a school level, district level, and provincial level. This situated the inquiry for a broad understanding of a world beyond the familiar, the known, and the understood.

It is important to note that methodological limitations of the study, with regards to participant selection, are present. Although I was purposeful in recruiting participants based on having a minimum of five years experience, it limits the perspective to Catholic educational leaders who have been leaders within a particular generation. Inadvertently, it excludes the perspective of younger and less experienced leaders who may or may not have had similar Catholic faith formation experience. Because Narrative inquiry methodology is purposeful in attending to the context of lived experience, having veteran leaders may provide a different contextual lens. In addition, participants were not selected according to any prior ideological stance they had on Catholic identity. Because my relationship with participants prior to the study was limited to professional acquaintance, I would not have been privy to any particular stance.

Given the challenging landscape Catholic educators are presently facing in Alberta, having experienced Catholic educational leaders as participants allowed for a thorough and relevant conversations with the three dimensional landscape congruent with narrative inquiry methodology. Public discourse surrounding the amalgamation to one publicly funded school system whereby religion would be taught as an individual subject continues to percolate. Recently, two Catholic Trustees suggested that religion class should be optional for students attending Catholic schools. As reported, these Catholic leaders stated, “schools should encourage, not force, students to take religion
classes…religion classes should be optional, and… the district could allow students to opt out” (French, 2017). French’s article suggests that Catholic schools are preventing students from graduating high school if they do not complete Religion courses. This is not accurate as graduation requirements are established by the provincial Ministry of Education and not at the discretion of individual school boards. Completing Religion classes is based on ideology of choices.

In an attempt to reaffirm the school board’s obligation of delivering Catholic education, the Board Chair issued a public statement, “publicly advocate[ing] against religious education as part of our mandate is blatantly opposed to the oath we took and disrespectful to all our stakeholders… [the Board] does not agree with their comments or position or their blatant disrespect for the decisions made by the board...[we] expect the leadership of the district to have Catholic school values and when those values weren't being expressed then there is concern about the credibility of the board as well as the credibility of the district” (Thibert, May 1, 2017).

I provide this example to illustrate the context of my research. Understanding the landscape of Catholic education in Alberta is critical for the contextual background looming in the minds’ of the participants. As stated by one participant, Barry, “there is a growing chorus amongst many Canadian Catholic education observers that publicly funded Catholic education is in a precarious situation and losing touch with the underlying religious mission and vision could have catastrophic consequences for the future of Catholic education and could ultimately lead to the dissolution of the system itself.” The Public School Boards’ Association of Alberta monthly newsletter clearly states their “three year Work Plan with the number one priority being to promote the
formation of a new single Public Inclusive Education System in Alberta” (May, 2017).
Advocating that choice in education leads to isolation and elitism, their mandate being to
dissolve any religious or private schools, including programs of choice such as sport
academies, language programs, and fine arts specialties; this directive is an example of an
even wider political ideology than just the teaching of Religion or faith based education.

**Researcher as Co-participant – Issues of Bias**

In qualitative research, the person and their communicative competencies are the
main ‘instrument’ of data collection. Because of this, they cannot adopt a neutral role in
the field and in their interactions with people” (Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p. 73). It is
important to reiterate that I am a born and raised Catholic who actively practices
Catholicism, and values Alberta’s publicly funded Catholic education system, thus stating
my bias. Certainly, it has been challenging writing from an analytical perspective as I
remain loyal to Catholic education and have strived through my work for it to remain as
vibrant and viable as possible.

I have intentionally placed myself throughout this study as both an insider and
outsider of Catholic education: an insider to share my experience as a Catholic
educational leader, and an outsider to critically analyze the findings of the study.
Certainly, the role of the researcher may be situated on a moving continuum from insider
to outsider. Sparkes & Smith (2014) advise that, “researcher positions are not static and a
variety of roles may be adopted during the course of a study” (p. 75). In fact, Bochner
(2001) establishes the connection between the person and professional as a compelling
reason to engage in narrative research:

*We must decide what calls us to stories. For some of us –*
I know its true for me – finding a good way to live our lives, to do the right things, to give voice to experiences, that have been shrouded in silence, to bring our intellect and emotionality together, to merge the personal and the academic, and to give something back to others draws us to the poetic, moral, and political side of narrative work. (p.154)

Grounded in the scholarly work of narrative inquiry, the researcher as co-participant is clearly established. Narrative Inquiry, being biographical in nature, situates the lived experiences of participants alongside the lived experience of the researcher, establishing a relational approach to research. Subsequently, working within the three-dimensional inquiry space allows the researcher and participant to collaboratively establish a relationship of rapport, vulnerability, and openness. This is an important consideration given that “participants in [narrative inquiry] have graciously trusted [us] and allowed [us] to come alongside them in their lives…being mindful that stories are lived before they are told” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 8). Always working within the three-dimensional inquiry space, “the focus of narrative inquiry is not only on individuals’ experience but also on the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals’ experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted” (Clandinin, 2013, p.12). As clearly expressed by Clandinin (2013), “our lives, and who we are and are becoming on our and participants’ landscapes, are under study. We are not objective inquirers. We are relational inquirers” (p. 24).

In addition, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) caution, “narrative research interpretations are necessarily tentative because they could always be understood differently by different people, at different times” (p 76). This is an important
underpinning to honouring the diversity of experiences leaders will encounter in the course of their career, each unique to the circumstance. McAdams et al. (2006), therefore, “rejects the notion of one correct interpretation: Progress toward objective truth is an illusion. What we have is only different constructs of the subject matter” (p. 76). Thus, the limitations of this study hinge on how experiences are understood as multiple interpretations of understanding. Yanow (2000) explains how such “interpretive methods are based on the presupposition that we live in a social world characterized by the possibilities of multiple interpretations. In this world there are no ‘brute data’ whose meaning is beyond dispute” (p.5).

As my research progressed, given the turbulent landscape of Catholic education, I would often discuss my work with several colleagues and friends from the Edmonton Public School District, several who completed their doctoral work during the time of my study. This provided me with the perspective of Catholic education from an outsider’s viewpoint. It was interesting to note that many attributed the turbulent state of affairs due to one particular schools board’s inability to make decisions and debate issues in an orderly, respectful manner, free of personal attacks. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions with non-Catholic parents. Many expressed absolute disbelief in how the media was portraying Catholic education, and questioned reporting inaccuracies especially with regards to students not being able to graduate without completing their Religion courses. These discussions were informal and not part of the original research design, but did serve to provide an insider lens on my research question.
**Data Analysis**

Due to the large volume of narrative data obtained, the task of analysis initially felt overwhelmingly daunting. I was glad that after each interview I took the time to read through each participant transcript. I realized that reading the written text brought about an added depth of analysis to each conversation. Systematically, I read the transcript a second time highlighting key phrases. Subsequent readings resulted in circling key words within each phrase that could best provide illustrative examples of the “big ideas.” Writing notes in the margins with each reading helped me to question, link, and relate to the experiences shared by participants. As I prepared for subsequent interviews, this process allowed me to prepare any lead or follow up conversation starters so as to create an “overlap” for continuity. With each additional participant interview and transcript, I often felt myself drowning in the data; however, I found that my methodical approach to each transcript provided the opportunity for a step-by-step analysis. Each reading and rereading brought about new layers of understanding and resonating themes of comparison and distinction between participants. I was able to relate to Patton’s (1990) description of data analysis, specifically as “the challenge to make sense of massive amounts of data, reduce volume of information, identify significant patterns and construct a framework for communication what the data revealed” (pp. 371-372). With each stage of reading and reading, I was able to establish the wholeness of each participant’s contributions, establish resonating themes, and extract specific supporting details.

In keeping with narrative inquiry methodology, it was important for me to work within the three dimensional space of temporality, sociality, and space using the horizon landscape as a metaphor for this study. Building on the constructive ontology and
epistemology understanding that knowledge is acquired through inquiry, I position myself on the landscape being able to see only to the horizon. Alongside my participants, we are able to see beyond the horizon, trying together to create new and tentative understandings.

Within this three dimensional research space of inquiry, it is important for the reader to understand each participant’s context and experience. While the profile is not intended to be exhaustive, it provides a brief overview of how participants situated themselves on the Catholic educational landscape constructing their understanding of Catholic identity with a leadership role.

**Participant One: Theresa Donsdale (pseudonym)**

*What kind of work can be more noble than to*
*Cultivate the minds of young people,*
*Guarding it carefully,*
*So that the knowledge and love of God and His holy precepts*
*Go hand in hand with learning?*
*To form young Christians and citizens*
*Isn’t this the most beautiful and noble-minded way to make use of life*
*Of all one’s talents and energy?*
*(St. John Cantius)*

Theresa Donsdale has worked in the field of Catholic education in Alberta for close to 40 years. Theresa worked as a classroom teacher, assistant principal, principal, and district principal of leadership formation with a large Catholic school district beginning in the early 1970s. Theresa holds a Bachelor of Education Degree, and a Masters’ Degree in Curriculum and Leadership. “I’ve worked with all kinds of teachers and students. Some schools had everything and some schools had nothing. My most vivid memories bring me back to the at-risk schools, the at-risk students, and the at-risk teachers.” Theresa recalls the days when she perceived Catholic education to be the unchallenged Separate School System. Theresa reminisces by stating, “Back in those days
we didn’t have to worry about the possibility of Catholic schools not being around. It was unimaginable to think the day would come where Catholics were being called out as discriminatory. Nothing could be further from the truth…they don’t know what we are about. So, our Catholic leaders really have to know and strongly articulate why we have Catholic schools.”

The challenges facing Catholic education are at the forefront of public discourse. Theresa states, “as we listen to the news and all these issues are occurring, we’re finding that there’s more and more people out there who are saying we don’t need Catholic schools.” Being a participant in this study has heightened her awareness of how Catholic education is being portrayed. “I was online and there was this particular article that I was very upset about.”

She explains, “In this article, the author goes on and on saying that this is the 21st century and that we have to just have one system, financially, and also because we don’t want to appear to give the rights to Catholic people more than giving the right to other people, so we’re being discriminatory…it doesn’t matter about the politics and religious rights and freedoms…he was just stating that society doesn’t need Catholic schools. So, I think as leaders we have to be really aware that this is no longer like 30 years ago when there wasn’t that talk.”

While trying to decide whether to participate in this study or not, Theresa admits being nervous. “When you first told me about this, I’m thinking, I don’t know what I’m going to say. I don’t know if I have anything valid to contribute to this. I am not sure what I can offer. Once I committed and started doing a bit of research, it kind of opened my eyes a little bit more in terms of what’s happening under my blindfold.” Theresa attributes
this new awareness as a result of her connecting with the research project. In a sense, being a participant placed her squarely in the midst of questioning Catholic educational leadership in tension with the public narrative. The quotation used to begin this section, speaks to the vision Theresa had as a Catholic educator. She explains:

I know teaching is a noble profession, but being a Catholic teacher puts a burden of responsibility that is answerable to God. God is entrusting the care of our children to us. It is a gift but also a duty that can’t be taken lightly. Not only are we educating students for today but also for the future. Our responsibility is connecting God to every child so that they can live a life of service - to each other but also to the common good of society.

During the course of our interviews together, Theresa reiterated the importance for Catholic educational leaders to convincingly articulate the importance of Catholic education in the whole of a democratic society. There must be renewed commitment to Catholic education. Theresa recalls the words of St. Thomas More, “you must not abandon the ship in a storm because you cannot control the winds...these are the times we are living in and we have to seriously renew our commitment to Catholic education and stand strong together.” The wind must not drift us apart or sweep us away.

**Participant Two: Charlie McCarthy (pseudonym)**

*In the setting of an authentic Gospel and Christ centered Catholic school,*

The student comes to experience their Dignity as a person,

*Before they know its definition. (Unknown)*

“Catholic Education is facing greater challenges today than it ever has.” Charlie McCarthy echoes these words time and time again, repeatedly affirming his unwavering
commitment to the excellence of Catholic education in Alberta and unceasing fidelity to his vocation as Catholic educator. Charlie, a teacher, assistant principal, principal, and assistant superintendent of human resources, firmly asserts the importance of Catholic education in the first minute of our first conversation. In his soft-spoken and calming voice, Charlie’s message resonates raw emotion. “People are choosing Catholic education for various reasons…and there’s lots of reasons. I mean when you look in Alberta the top performing districts are Catholic, not to mention our great results with FNMI (First Nation Metis and Inuit) students, our graduation rates, our academic excellence, along with so many other accomplishments. I couldn’t possibly mention all the reasons to choose Catholic education.”

Charlie’s nostalgia is easily detected as he thinks back to his early days teaching. “It’s a whole philosophy too. And it’s about how we treat each other. Because, the other thing that comes to mind for me as a young Catholic teacher in those days was how you were surrounded by an incredible group of people. I can remember in the early eighties my first two full years of teaching. You didn’t want to get to (school) later than 8:10, because there was a table, and you might start with four or five people but every time somebody came in, you’d add a chair. You would end up with maybe eight to ten people. The conversation was so rich and it was such a great way to start your day.”

Charlie’s experience of thirty plus years spans between two Catholic school districts in Alberta. He holds a Bachelor of Education and Master’s Degree in Religious Education. Charlie explains, “I remember when I applied for the Newman Bursary. That was an incredible experience. I reflect on that experience thinking how it was an opportunity for me to learn more about my faith and the people around me. It just started
out with a group of us teachers deciding to take a few courses. Then I stayed on to get the MRE [Master of Religious Education]. I started in 1996 and I didn’t finish everything until 2006. It was a ten-year process and more than just a few courses. I would have to have a thesaurus close at hand because there were words I’m thinking what the heck is this? It was a tough go. I worked hard at it. The first course was very dry. I’m signed up for the second course and I am thinking do I really want to do this? My hand is on the classroom door and I’m looking at the schedule on the door that is posted and trying to decide what to do. My hand was on that handle for the longest time because I thought can I do this? And I open the door and I went in.” Charlie attributes this life changing decision as pivotal in his faith formation.

With regard to the current status of Catholic education in Alberta, Charlie clearly asserts, “It’s going to be tough…it’s going to be tough with everything that’s going on right now with Catholic education. I don’t see a quick ending either. We need to think and touch base with our identity. This is part of who I am. We have to be who we say we are.”

Charlie acknowledges many tensions in the current landscape. “Sometimes in these stressful times, people show their worst sides. Unfortunately, there are hidden political agendas at play and it is hurting Catholic education. I don’t know if there is going to be a breaking point. I don’t think there’s been anything else like this in all of our history that really puts the focus on us as Catholic schools and educators. I don’t know…I’ve never seen anything else like this. And here it is. Even as an educator five years ago, we weren’t having these conversations. I find it really quite shocking.”

Discussions surrounding safe and caring schools have been especially derogatory for Catholic schools. The media has painted Catholic schools as cruel, judgmental, and
unaccepting of diverse students, especially LGBTQ. This narrative has been increasingly accusatory and hostile. The Public Interest Alberta Group, advocating for “public funds for public schools” insinuated inclusive policies of Catholic boards as failing to meet the needs of students. They noted that for one particular school board, their policy was, “embarrassing and inappropriate in 2016. Many other elements of this policy are also deeply concerning and may contravene government legislation” (August, 2016).

Charlie expresses how hurtful this is for Catholic educators who work with diverse students and have demonstrated success through Provincial Achievement Exam results, High School completion rates in particular with Indigenous students, and the provincial Accountability Pillar. It is with a tearful quiver in his voice, that Charlie reiterates, “We want to make sure all of our students are safe and cared for. We educate the whole child. We see the face of Jesus in all of our students. That’s why the quote at the beginning is so important to me. I have always aspired to treat all children with dignity and respect because they are children of God…we are all children of God.”

Participant Three: Barry Youcam (pseudonym)

The most powerful leadership Tool you have is your Own personal example (John Wooden)

“Sometimes we create for ourselves a false god. We are created in the image of God, but we don’t like that, we want to create God in our image…we’re projecting on him who we want him to be. That’s not just bad; that’s sinful.” Barry, a teacher, assistant principal, principal, assistant superintendent, and superintendent of a Catholic District, has served Catholic education for over 20 years. “Christ is at the center of Catholic education and as Catholic educators we are part of a beautiful 2,000 year old tradition,”
Barry assertively affirms. As a Catholic educational leader, Barry asserts the importance of leading with words but more importantly with action. Pope Francis advises educators to “impart knowledge and values with their words but it will be more influential on the kids if your words are accompanied by your witness.” When leaders listen with presence, and act with a genuine desire to support the needs of others, students observe such overt behavior modeling respect, compassion, and empathy. According to Barry, being able to work alongside others in a collegial, affirming, and supportive manner are attributes of Catholic educational leaders. Servant leadership, a term first coined in 1970 by Robert Greenleaf, situates the needs of others as priority. Greenleaf (1977) states:

It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely them- selves to become servants? And, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or at least, not be further deprived? (p.13)

Servant leadership resonates with Barry, as a way to set an example not only by words but also, more importantly, by action. Barry explains, “to be a Christian means to be Christ like. We are called to serve through our leadership always giving witness to the faith.”

Barry completed two Bachelors degrees, a Master’s and a Ph.D. “Our faith is meant to find expression in tangible things. People need to touch and feel God whether it’s in the beautiful stained glass windows, or the old European churches that are just
gorgeous… sometimes you just look at the chalice and it is absolutely beautiful. I am proud to be Catholic when I look at those things.”

Having served in three publicly funded Catholic school districts in Canada, and one privately funded Catholic school in the United States, Barry’s experiences lead him to the understanding that, “Catholic education is about the mission. In our case, it’s the Catholic mission. So, all glory be to God for what we are doing. It’s my life motto. *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*: All things for the greater glory of God. It’s not for my glory; it’s for God’s glory. This quotation, being the motto of the Society of Jesus; The Jesuits, an order of the Catholic Church. Leadership is a ministry. It’s about how my work serves Catholic education.”

Barry explains by sharing this example, “Apparently if you fly over top the Statue of Liberty, there’s the artistic work inside the crown on the head. But when the Statue of Liberty was built, planes apparently hadn’t yet been invented. So when this artist constructed the statue, he never thought that anybody would every actually see the crown of the head but he still put work into it because it was for God’s glory.” Barry uses this example to articulate how Catholic leadership is a ministry to serve the mission of the Church and give witness to the glory of God. Catholic education gives expression to God so that students may understand the bigger meaning. “This is especially important in a 21st century world where meaning has become so vacuous…it’s been reduced to how many friends you have on Facebook, or how many likes you’ve got on your latest Twitter post. It’s just so temporal. What Catholic education offers kids is something that’s eternal, that’s lasting, and that’s meaningful. (Something that) will ultimately fill your heart.”
“The Catholic story is our story.” Barry acknowledges this understanding with clear intent and unwavering conviction. “We must remain distinct from the secular soup…we are not just recipients of the story, we are contributors to the story.” Barry explains further, “The tensions with secular culture are massive and ultimately our goal in Catholic education is not just to prepare students for this world, it’s to prepare them for the next world which includes preparing them for their ultimate meeting with their maker and their destiny for sainthood. Their eternal home is in heaven and we need to prepare them for that. Preparing kids academically, preparing them for the workplace, preparing them for active citizenship…that for us is an incomplete notion of what a complete education is…the connection to God is missing.”

Through critical examination Barry describes the browbeating Catholic education has endured during the past year in Alberta. Barry articulates a clear and decisive position. “The media is a juggernaut…we have just allowed ourselves to be smeared but it’s not backed up by the quantitative data. Catholic schools aren’t safe? I had my communications manager and we went through every three-year educational plan in the entire province because I’m getting sick of this narrative that Catholic schools aren’t safe and caring. We took the averages (of the provincial Accountability Pillar – specifically the questions relating to safe and caring school culture) for every division this past year and then the running three-year average. We ranked them. Who’s the safest division? Then we color-coded every one of the Catholic school districts in yellow. Sixty-one school districts in total and all the Catholic districts were in the upper half. And I’m just thinking, we’re being targeted in the media as being unsafe and uncaring, and unwelcoming yet we’re the exemplars that others should be looking to. Most Catholic
school districts are in the top third for safety across this province, consistently year after year. It’s the staff, it’s the parents, and it’s the stakeholders giving us these results.”

Barry’s stance is clearly articulated, “It saddens me that people are choosing to listen to the media and forgetting that we as Catholics come from the most ancient academic and scholarly and philosophical tradition that the Western world has ever known - The Catholic Church. Two thousand years old. Its origin has produced Thomas Aquinas, its produced Augustine, its produced John Paul II, and Benedict XVI. All these great world class thinkers, and we’ll reject that 2,000 year old tradition for the teachings of the loud mouths using political posturing and hidden agendas to sway us from our faith. I am not willing to eat the philosophical junk food being served right now.”

**Participant Four: Thomas Bernardone (pseudonym)**

> Remember that the Christian life is one of action; not of speech and daydreams.  
> Let there be few words and many deeds, and let them be done well.  
> (*St. Vincent Pallotti*)

Being Catholic “encompasses everything we do and its part of our person whether you’re at work, at school or in the community, or with your family, or enjoying your faith on the weekend.” Thomas, a veteran 30-year Catholic educator with Master of Education degree in Educational Administration and Leadership, asserts that being a Catholic educational leader “is part of everything that we do. 24/7. Your actions are what define you…your words are important; the beliefs are important but more importantly are the actions…the quote is a good reminder that there should be few words but many deeds. It also reminds me that whatever you do, do it well and be proud.”
As a teacher, principal, and deputy superintendent in charge of leadership formation, Thomas’ reputation is deeply rooted in credibility and integrity. He states, “Gospel values call us to look at the common good and the betterment of everybody. So our role is more to accept, to be with people, to support people and to be part of a group that makes the world better for everybody.”

Catholic schools differ greatly from their public school counterparts. “We are different than the public school across the street and I think to me it’s taken a long time to figure that out either as a school principal and as a teacher. I remember saying I don’t know how we’re different because they do many good things. But I think we’re different because we are trying to create citizens who are going to go out and make the world better…the public system is trying to create citizens who are out to make their lives a success through their careers and through what they do. Our first reaction is how to make the world a better place for everyone.”

Having worked in two Catholic school districts in Alberta and for the Ministry of Education, Thomas remains a firm advocate for Catholic education and is quick to explain that it consistently sets the standard of excellence for student achievement in the province. “The government recognizes Catholic schools are very successful across the province. We keep the bar high for all schools.” Thomas also notes that enrolment in Catholic schools has been steadily increasing year after year. “Not only are Catholic students coming, but 30% that are not Catholic. They are coming for a reason. Parents want a faith education for their children.” Using the example of welcoming Fort McMurray students after the devastating fires, Thomas states, “Our actions speak loud and clear. Look at how all schools and school divisions just opened their doors and their
arms to anybody and haven’t asked any questions. Every Catholic school division has said we’re here for everybody.”

Responsible for the faith formation of principals and assistant principals as one of his many roles, Thomas references the leadership demonstrated by Pope Francis as an exemplar for Catholic leadership. “I am using a book this year with our newer principals. It’s called Leadership Lessons from Pope Francis… I love Pope Francis. He knows where it’s at and what we should be doing as a Catholic. He lives what he preaches.”

Thomas fully acknowledges that Catholic education in Alberta is in a vulnerable position and it is incumbent on Catholic educational leaders to look at “their role differently… as an opportunity to showcase what we can do and not focusing on defending. We need to focus on what we do because then the record will speak for itself and they’ll see why Catholic schools are needed…. look at all the good things we do…. look at all the great results we get… the proof will be in the pudding.” Thomas reluctantly admits the reason, “When we talk about Catholic education in the province, I’m worried about it. We don’t have the language to articulate what it is we’re doing because I think we’ve become so complacent with our faith.” Others are speaking the Catholic narrative and it is a misinformed narrative. We are allowing people with political agendas to articulate Catholic identity. Thomas is clearly agitated, “they have us jumping from one puddle to another…. my question is who’s going to be the lightening rod? Those political agendas have taken on a life of their own. In times like this the less said to the media the better… stay out of the media and don’t respond however if you must, focus on the many wonderful things which are happening in Catholic schools and turn the narrative around.”
“What we can do is practice what we preach. Focus on the practice not on the preaching. We do what we need to do in our building, in our schools, in our communities and not retaliate in the media. We provide our students supports like we have always done and continue to do. We need to stay out of these agendas being put forward by those who have decided to stir the pot. We can’t get caught in these whirlwinds.” Thomas’ advice aligns with many Catholic educational leaders stating, “We do a lot of things really well in Catholic schools. That’s why our numbers are growing and our communities are successful. Our kids come to us from different faiths and different religions because we’re doing something right.”

**Participant Five: Eugenia (Researcher)**

*God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me, Which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I never may know it in this life, But I shall be told it in the next.*

*(John Henry Newman)*

Having been a student, teacher, assistant principal, and principal in Catholic education, all within one Catholic school district for 44 years, clearly establishes that Catholic education has encompassed most of my life. My parents, devout Catholics, immigrants from Italy in the early 1960’s, relied on the providence of God for their future. My parents, tenant farmers, fleeing from the country they loved to a place where culture and language were foreign, constitutes a gargantuan leap of faith. My mother would say, “When you are poor and need to provide for your family, you do whatever you have to do. We knew God would be with us. Back in those days, we prayed for the simple things in life and we prayed together because we all needed those prayers…now
everyone has everything. The young people today think that they don’t need God. Some of them think they are God.”

While in conversation with Thomas, he and I came to realize we share similar backgrounds. I express how, “Our parents came from Italy and they struggled. They didn’t come here because they were rich. They came with a suitcase. My dad often said that if he had $500.00 in his pocket he would have turned right around and returned home. They didn’t want to be here. But they didn’t give up on God’s providence during all of their trials and suffering.” As a Catholic educator, much of my formation came from my family. Questioning the will of God was unheard of. So much so that to this day, every life decision begins and ends with prayerful discernment and spiritual guidance from a priest. I now understand how institutional completeness, a term described by Bramadat & Seljak (2008) as “the degree to which members of a given ethnic or religious community can live their whole lives within the orbit of their own community” (p. 28). Church, as defined by my mother and rather represented an institution of solidarity founded on common ethnical traditions. Church depicted a safe place to continue living the understood culture and tradition of their native country within the context of a new landscape. Although my parents, many years later, remain loyal to the model of Church as Institution, my affiliation with the church represents a more tempered version closer aligned with Church as Mystical Community. Growing up within a diverse culture, largely due to my schooling, and certainly influenced by my role as Catholic educational leader, I find fulfillment in ascribing for a relational affiliation to the faith. Helping students believe in God’s unconditional love and fostering a relationship with Christ by
understanding his divinity and humanness through the parables continue to anchor my own Catholic identity and leadership role.

My career started in the late 1980’s teaching Music and Language Arts. I think back to those days wondering if I realized the significance of my work as a Catholic educator. In speaking with my participants, I came to realize that I certainly did not have the faith formation necessary to truly appreciate the responsibility entrusted to me by parents, colleagues, and the Church. We often overlook the obligation we have to serve the Church. While in conversation with my participants, I find myself retelling the same event:

Much of my teaching career I spent working in schools largely populated with low income, immigrant, and First Nation Metis and Inuit families. There is a call to serve these communities in a different way – to bring the Gospel values of serving the poor with compassion and dignity. I think that working in these particular school communities has had a tremendous influence on the formation of my Catholic identity. Was I ill prepared for this multi faceted leadership role? Absolutely. Did I have a lot to learn about the distinctiveness of Catholic leadership? Without a doubt.

After completing a Masters degree in Curriculum Studies and Leadership in 1996, I began contemplating the possibility of a leadership role as assistant principal. Truly my intent at the time was simply to share my organizational skills. I convinced myself that being the master organizer in a school would facilitate the work of others and streamline procedures. Everyone would benefit. I never imagined it would involve faith formation. Thinking back, I did naively believe that faith formation was the least of my worries as an
administrator. Why such an oversight? The notion of a Catholic identity and being an authentic witness to the faith were a given. Everyone was Catholic after all. We were all meant to understand our God in the same way. However, I was plagued with huge disappointment when I realized that some teachers did not know how to organize a liturgical celebration. Many felt uncomfortable with the Mass responses. Writing prayers was an exercise in frustration. I wondered how this could be possible as I began to challenge my understanding of Catholic identity and the understanding of those around me. With this in mind, I quickly realized that organization, curriculum, finances, and other administrative responsibilities paled in comparison to faith formation. I could learn the “what” of the job, but how was I going to learn the “how?”

What brought me to this research study? My life. As simple as that might seem, I truly believe that each experience both in my personal and professional life has served as a stepping-stone to my present situation. Never imagining the possibility of pursuing a PhD, here I sit, exploring a research question I also never imagined. I question myself thinking, “How did I ever get myself into this?” And the words of John Henry Newman provide much needed consolation. When speaking with participants they unanimously respond, “God put you into this for a reason.” Interestingly enough, my own colleagues, while working on a district project profiling Catholic education would remark, “you’re the perfect person for this.” My passion for Catholic education found both a personal and professional purpose in the writing of this dissertation.

Given the current state of Catholic education in our province, the need for renewal and commitment must be steadfast. We cannot let those who oppose Catholic education articulate their stance unheeded; we must join in the discourse as leaders whose ultimate
goal is to serve their learning communities. I am reminded of the power of a single mustard seed as articulated in the Gospels Matthew 13:31–32; Mark 4:30–32; Luke 13:18–19. If Catholic educational leaders could imagine they were a mustard seed of faith, the narrative could illuminate and forge new understanding of Catholic education and generate a renewed and contemplative articulation, expressing the diversity of a 21st century world.

My participants are passionate for Catholic education and they express that their commitment is unwavering. Barry explicitly states, “I am not willing to eat this philosophical junk food being served by the secular world.” Charlie, a man of great insight, shares his story of Catholic leadership with a tear in his eye. His love of Catholic education far surpasses what might be captured from the words on a page. Charlie gives me the courage to share my stories alongside his. Theresa reminds me of the many relationships I have developed throughout my leadership journey. Theresa prods me to question, “Was I worthy of their trust? Would they define my leadership as Catholic or secular? Would they or I know the difference? Alongside my participants, we continue to walk and talk into our journey of exploring how Catholic educational leaders may best serve their vocation in the 21st century. Willingly, we expose our vulnerabilities, alongside each other, and alongside the reader asking difficult questions and considering multiple answers. Together we join in telling the stories we live by: the stories of our journey as Catholic educational leaders. Together we travel the fault line between what we understand and what we question.
Chapter 4: Findings

Father Jim Corrigan: Who do you say that I am?

I am not quite sure who I am. Most of the time I am who others expect me to be. Of this I am certain. Growing up, my parents had great expectations. Doing well in school was at the top of the list. My parents could not afford an education when they were growing up and if you were to ask them what their biggest regret in life would be, they would quickly state - not having an education. I surpassed the expectations of my parents in the education department. Going to University was a big deal in my family, especially being the first.

Things have changed though. These days my mother looks at me with a puzzled expression trying to figure out why I would return back to school at the ripe old age of 47. “Exactly what will a PhD get you? You are smart enough.” I am not sure how to answer. I am not sure it will not “get” me anything nor will it make me “more” of something.

My life has been a storybook of uncertainties, a string of firsts, a mishap of events, and often a thing of coincidence. Life choices have led me on the path I have chosen to walk upon. Like Jesus on the road to Emmaus, I too might ask those I encounter, “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus does not, at first, reply but rather waits to hear how others respond; this being an invitation to relationship. Jesus fully knows the answer, but does not impose His interpretation on others. Others must come to discover Him for themselves. They must know Him on their own terms based on their own life experiences. I, unlike Jesus, do not know the answer and would stumble with a shaky response. I might tell them I am a sister, or a daughter, or a wife, or a teacher, or a principal, or a student,
or a friend, or a mere mortal waddling through life with the hope that one day, Heaven will be my reward.

I am Catholic, I would explain. With that qualifier, the landscape often shifts. The other might wonder why I would choose to describe myself as such. Why? Where do I begin to explain that God has orchestrated my life and that it is He who leads me on my journey? How do I explain that I pray to God for guidance, strength, and perseverance? Do I tell my mother that I am working on my PhD because God has led me to this? Now, if I tell her that, she would understand, but others, I am not quite sure.

Rather I compose a story to live by that will satisfy both the moment and the person asking. To those that understand I tell them the real story. God has put me on this journey for a reason yet to be revealed.

I tell Father Jim, that his story about the Holy Spirit has resonated with me, and that I have carried that story with me since he shared it. At that time, I was a rookie principal assigned to a dilapidated inner city school. I tell Father Jim, that the Holy Spirit manifested life choices for me as well. It didn’t involve me deciding to become a priest at the age of 40 as it did for Fr. Jim. The Holy Spirit was much gentler with me.

When Father Jim and I sit and talk about the Holy Spirit, we know and we understand it to be a sacred story; a story that has been foundational to the nurturing of our Catholic faith. We are able to give witness, and articulate to each other, these life changing events which have been formative in our Catholic identity. It is without hesitation that Father Jim and I attribute our major life choices to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
When I ask Father Jim, “Who do you say that I am?” He smiles as if knowing some great secret, and says, “You are a force to be reckoned with. God gave you some kind of courage.”

When Father Jim asks me who do you say that I am? I respond by saying he is an inspiration from God made human for our understanding. God has given Father Jim some kind of courage. I contemplate on the interpretation and description of each other. Together we are composing a story to live by. A story we tell others and ourselves. A story of understanding, that reaches beyond what can be understood from the written words on paper. These understandings grow in the heart, are contemplated in the mind, and find expression through our words and action.

Fr. Jim gave me the courage to be authentic and give witness to the trials and tribulations of life, and accept God’s love unconditionally and God’s transformative guidance. Wearing the wounds of life and finding the resilience to persevere are attributes I learned from Fr. Jim that have influenced my own Catholic identity. Just as there are many layers to the life of Fr. Jim, I realized there are many life experiences I have knitted together, in the hope of creating a cohesive ‘story to live by.’

**Reviewing the Research Question**

The intent of this study is to explore the research question, “what is the lived experience of Catholic educational leaders in relation to shaping, informing, and influencing the conceptual formation of Catholic identity in 21st century schools?” As a Catholic educational leader, I begin to gnaw at this question, long before it became formal research. Thinking of how my own life journey continues to unfold helps me to understand that I did not shape, inform, or influence my Catholic identity in isolation.
Many influences such as people, places, and events weaved together to inform my sense of self. Fr. Jim’s life story challenged my own commitment to faith, as unfinished and ever changing. His story resonated with my unsettled understanding of what it entails to be a Catholic leader and a person of faith. Fr. Jim’s story gave me the courage to have my own voice and begin to craft a story to live by; a story unfinished. Thus the use of narrative inquiry as a methodology served as a purpose in creating the opportunity for participants to find their own voice in articulating Catholic educational leadership. At a time when the existence of Catholic education in publicly funded schools is under threat it is not only a relevant but also a timely topic of discourse. It is logical to assume that the mission of the Catholic Church is realized through Catholic education, thus Catholic educational leaders play a decisive role in building teaching and learning communities that are authentically Catholic and committed in faith, understanding that such authenticity can have multiple and diverse forms of expression. Their contributions to the inquiry of the research question provides insight to all Catholic educational leaders in the 21st century and allows for collaborative exploration of how leadership can best serve Catholic education. As articulated in the quotation beginning the chapter, it becomes a shared responsibility between the Church and schools to advocate, inspire, and nurture Catholic education in schools. The authorities of the Church are dependent on lay people to give credibility to the mission of Catholic faith through the witness of everyday living. Using narrative inquiry methodology facilitates how stories of self, told and retold within the three-dimensional inquiry space of time, space, and place, contribute to the formation, understanding, and articulation of Catholic leadership identity.
Four participants were selected for this study. I met with each participant four to five times during a four-month period with each session lasting 1.5 hours in length. The initial conversations were guided by the focus questions provided to participants, in an attempt to begin sharing initial thoughts on the research question and to begin the exploration of these complex issues. However, it became quickly evident that participants were ready to engage in deep and thought-provoking conversations with regards to Catholic educational leadership. To maintain the integrity of narrative inquiry methodology, participants were encouraged to bring forward any experiences they deemed relevant and important to answering the research question. The focus questions, found in the appendix, simply became a fallback if the conversation was not flowing. After all the conversations were transcribed, there were nearly 600 pages of data, which clearly verified the intensity and detail of the dialogue. Not only were participants willing to share their experiences, they did so with thoughtful reflection and in great depth. Through the telling and retelling of lived experiences, narrative inquiry bared layers of understanding and meaning. Each participant selected a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Authenticity of voice was respected by using participants’ comments as verbatim. I ensured that participants were continuously informed of my progress. It was especially important for me to maintain open communication within a collaborative researcher relationship. Participants were eager to encourage my progress and affirm the importance of the study. Although I only knew the participants as professional acquaintances prior to the study, I came to admire and value their insights, leadership, and courage as the research relationship progressed. Consequently, as we delved deeper in the study, we developed a rapport based on mutual trust and respect. By cultivating a space for critical
inquiry, the analysis of the findings, although challenging given our shared common
loyalty to Catholic education, motivated me to think, rethink, shape, and reshape multiple
reiterations. It became apparent that the inquiry directed at the research question was of
great importance to all of us both on a personal and professional level. Hence the intent
of this chapter is to provide a conceptual landscape of the findings that emerged as related
to the research question.

This chapter is intentionally written in the format of a confessional tale. As
previously explained, I situated myself as both an insider and outsider in the research.
Sparkes and Smith (2014) explain that, “the two main characteristics of confessional tales
are their highly personalized styles and their self-absorbed mandates” (p.156). This
positions me, as a researcher and as a co-participant, in alignment with narrative inquiry
methodology, to weave my Catholic leadership stories alongside those of my participants.
As explicated by Sparkes and Smith (2014) within this context, I am able to insert my
“personal voice of the author announcing (my) presence: ‘Here I am. This happened to
me and this is how I felt, reacted and coped. Walk in my shoes for a while” (Sparkes and
Smith, 2014, p. 157). In order to help the reader differentiate between my voice as
researcher and my voice as participant, I shift in narration from the third person, to first
person, with a change to italicized font. First person narration enhances readability and
serves to establish both cohesion and dissonance in the findings. Van Maanen (1988)
explains, confessional tales “are intended to show how particular works come into being,
and this demands personalized authority” (p. 74). This is well aligned with narrative
inquiry whereby the lived experience of both the research and participants are central to
the study. Because the profile of Catholic education has dramatically increased within the
public sphere, the confessional tale allows there to be an “intimacy to be established with the reader, a personal character to develop, trials to portray, and ...a world to be represented within which the intrepid fieldworker(s) will roam” (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 74). Revealing the human qualities of the researcher and participants are central to the confessional tale allowing, for as Van Maanen (1988) suggests, “personal biases, character flaws, or bad habits as a way of building...a self-portrait with which the reads can identify” (p. 74). Discussing one’s faith, often a very personal component of one’s identity, especially within research text, requires the openness and willingness to show vulnerability to a variety of audiences. In addition the confessional tale expects the researcher to know the field well. Van Maanen (1988) advises to “trot our these legendary figures when daring to bare all. Such figures must be said to know the culture well. They are represented therefore as “experienced,” “veteran,” “revered,” “respected,” “senior,” and “central” informants” (pp.80-81). Such attributes certainly describe both the participants and researcher of this study given our multitude of Catholic leadership positions and our years of experience. Drawing on personal experience allows for tensions to be revealed within a contextual landscape and contributes to the authenticity and depth of the study. Sparkes (2002) concurs by articulating the importance of confessional tales as a means of coming to know others and ourselves within the research process, and acknowledge the important for self-reflexivity, personal voice, and research authority (pp.71-72).

**Participant Findings**

As I began to systematize the data collected, I looked to find reoccurring words, statements, and ideas. During this process, I attached codes, “a short, simple and precise
key word(s) that represents and captures a segment of the datum’s primary content and essences” (Sparkes, 2002, p. 116). By organizing and collating similar and reoccurring codes, I was able to establish categories. As a result, participant findings generated four organizing categories: A Catholic Identity, Catholic Education, Catholic Leadership, and Relationships. Each category was subsequently framed with additional sub-categories to as to further develop and deepen Catholic identity as a storied landscape of experience within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry framework. Sub-categories represent common threads, within the broader categorical titles, which articulate specific detail, content, and example. Navigating this inquiry space gave rise to contradictions and tensions surrounding the articulation and expression of Catholic identity, the difficult and complex role of Catholic educational leadership, the turmoil of an educational landscape that is challenging the relevance of Catholic education, and the dynamic and every evolving influence relationships have on faith formation. Throughout this research study, I have had to position myself within these contradictions and tensions from three perspectives: Practicing Catholic, Catholic educational leader, and researcher. This multiplicity of viewpoints has been challenging; however, it has also provided me the opportunity to critically question and contribute to the Catholic conversation from a diversity of experience.

Throughout the analysis of the data I found several points of tension that were hard to resolve. For example, trying to imagine myself in the role of my participants, although we are all Catholic, challenged me to understand how my own articulation of Catholic identity differed. Speaking through these points of inquiry such as faith formation provided the opportunity for me to intently listen to the journey of others,
imagining myself in the situations they discussed. Without the opportunity to engage with participants in multiple conversations targeted at how the conceptual formation of Catholic identity is shaped, formed, and influences, my own understanding, would be limited. The importance of Catholic identity and its expression proves to be challenging, and without deliberate and intentional dialogue the struggles will continue to divide rather than unite. Why? The findings of this study reveal the importance of faith and relationship; one without the other is void of growth both personally and professionally.

Fr. Jim Corrigan, whose story I share at the opening of the this chapter, ironically the findings illustrates the struggles, turmoil, doubt, and sacrifice needed in the forming and reforming of a Catholic identity. Without Fr. Jim’s relationship, my commitment to Catholic educational leadership tangled with my own personal faith journey, could have resulted in me straying from the faith. I share this example to illustrate how we can find ourselves in the other. Fr. Jim challenged me to see my faith journey alongside his own personal story. There, in the midst of friendship, I found my renewed hope and commitment to the ongoing formation of my Catholic identity.

As part of my confessional tale, it is important to note my struggles analyzing the large amount of data generated from the participant interviews. Although initially overwhelming, I decided to approach the analysis in a simple yet systematic manner. My first reading of each transcript included checking for accuracy and highlighting key ideas and circling key words. In the margins I would write comments and questions for my own understanding. The notes on the margins facilitated the next conversation with participants with follow up questions or comments requiring clarification. It became evident that reading and rereading each transcript multiple times allowed for patterns to
emerge. Subsequently, I used different color highlighters to draw comparison and contrast among participant stories. The messiness of hands – on coding, versus using a software program, provided me the opportunity to peel the layers of analysis in a manner that provoked critical thinking. Although my approach to coding was systematic, it was not linear. The recursive process, of reading, rereading, coloring, highlighting, circling, underlining, writing notes, and posing questions, detached me from the participants and focused my attention to translating field text into research text. The coding process was transformative and facilitated my transition from participant to researcher. I include pictures of my data analysis as a visual demonstration of my process. It was hard to imagine that the messiness of data analysis would translate into written coherent text. I provide my example so that other qualitative researchers might get a glimpse into the complexity of coding. By remaining confident and patient, mixed with positive self-talk, I was able to transform the messiness into clarity.
Catholic Identity: Permeating the Self – I Am Who I Am

To begin with, it was evident from participant conversations that Catholic identity across landscapes of home, school, work, parish, and community is critically important to my participants when considering how Catholic educational leadership identity shape, inform, and influence 21st century schools. Participants asserted that it is not possible for leaders to separate their Catholic identity from their sense of selves. As Theresa states:

Catholic identity means to me that no matter what we do, no matter where we are, we are basing our practice and living out the Gospel values. Catholic identity during the day is shown through prayer, and through liturgy, and all other practices. It is not just about going to Church for an hour every week and being able to quote scripture. I can’t take away Catholic from the activities that I did. Whatever I did, I did it through the lens of faith.

Theresa further asserts her position explaining that:

Although we teach Religion for maybe 40 to 45 minutes a day but it’s not just that. Catholic faith is permeated throughout the day and throughout every aspect of the curriculum. So, it’s woven into the very fabric of our teaching and of course our daily life. You are a Catholic leader twenty-four hours a day. Yes, being a Catholic leader is challenging but you always have to remember that you are a model for everyone during school hours and even after school hours.

This notion of Catholic identity permeating every aspect of a Catholic educator’s life certainly appears to be a lofty expectation, especially for an ever-increasing number of young inexperienced teachers. Given that most Catholic school districts are experiencing growth in student population in the province of Alberta, an increased number of teachers
are required at a faster rate. Teachers straight from university in times past were somewhat assured of a few years of substitute teaching, whereby they could gradually obtain the experience that would translate into offers of long term contracts. Charlie, a Human Resource specialist, explains how new teachers are given long-term contracts as soon as they have their teaching certification. Given this new reality, the mentorship of faith formation for young teachers remains at the forefront of Catholic leadership responsibilities. It cannot be taken for granted however, that faith formation and Catholic identity is the same thing. Faith formation and Catholic identity may be better understood within a circular context of faith formation contributing to a teacher’s Catholic identity within an evolving and dynamic context. However faith formation does not always guarantee good teachers or vice versa. Charlie’s logic would suggest that while schools desire formed teachers, formation depends on being a teacher over time. Within this context, teachers need practice being teachers. In the past, teachers had opportunity for short-term varied experiences, easing their transition to full paced responsibilities. Now, from their first day in the classroom, Charlie explains:

As a Catholic, you want to carry yourself, and not that you’re Catholic in church, but you’re Catholic everywhere. It’s who you are and how you carry yourself at all times. So, it’s a vocation. Not that you’re Catholic when you’re in the classroom. You don’t turn Catholic on and off.

Thomas expresses similar sentiments, adding that in fact Catholic identity is embodied into the very fabric of one’s being. Our identity is a work in progress, ever changing and evolving based on experiences and our understanding of these experiences.
Living out a Catholic identity requires commitment on the part of the leader and the entire school community. He explains this complexity:

Catholic identity is not something you ever finish. It’s ongoing and it’s not something we turn on and off. It’s part of who you are. It’s part of your fabric. It becomes part of you more and more. We’re on that pathway to God. The longer we’re on that path the closer we get and the more intense we get. That path has many different forks in the road. For our young Catholic teachers, we as leaders are not the only ones responsible to help them in their faith formation. They have got to bring it to themselves and do something because it is their faith, and their journey. So yes, we can bring them along on that road, but there’s also some things that they have to do on their own.

In conversation with participants, we discussed at length how their own faith journey has been a life long endeavour and often not at the forefront at the beginning of their careers; they agreed that teachers are bombarded with responsibilities and duties that are overwhelming and take precedence over faith formation. Thus, all participants established that Catholic educational leaders must fully understand this and commit to mentorship of teachers not only in curriculum and assessment, but also in faith. Understanding that everyone is on a very personal faith journey needs to be recognized and honoured and it needs to be talked about. In Catholic schools, this needs to be, from the participants’ viewpoints, clearly situated at the forefront of Catholic leadership.

Participants clearly indicated that Catholic identity is a life long journey, and being Catholic cannot be turned off and on. Interestingly enough, they shared concerns regarding the faith formation of teachers. They asked whether it could it be that expecting
our young teachers to be fully formed in their Catholic identity stands as an unreasonable
expectation, given that participants stated it has taken them a lifetime to develop. As the
Catholic leader participants stated in this study, faith formation is a work in progress,
therefore expecting differently from our teachers seems to be in contradiction of their own
experience. This could be attributed to hindsight acting as a lens of clarity and
understanding that might not be possible when living in the present moment of an
experience. As expressed by Thomas, gently guiding and supporting teachers in their faith
journey honours their experience and validates their sense of autonomy. Permeating the
self in faith is nurtured in different spaces and places. In respectful, trusting, and
supportive mentorship, Catholic educational leaders strive to create safe space for
Catholic identity to be shaped, informed, and influenced both of self and others. Are they
always successful? Participants in this study answered no.

Relating to my experience as a young music and English teacher, I do not recall
any of my school principals as being exemplary mentors in the formation of my Catholic
identity. I am unable to recall special events, other than the standard prayer beginning a
staff meeting, taking our students to Mass, and teaching Religion. I was so engrossed in
teaching the curriculum for Music and English that everything else took a back burner
and no one told me otherwise. Like the participants stated, I was completely immersed in
the curriculum. Within my personal life, faith involved singing in the Church choir. My
bases were covered, and I did not have the insight or maturity to recognize that I was
responsible for helping my students’ faith formation or that I was a contributor to the
Catholic culture of the school. As a consequence, articulating the faith to others, as far
as my understanding spanned, rested in the doing not the saying: teaching Religion, attending Mass, singing in the Church choir.

It was in my veteran years that I recall making a conscious effort to reflect on my Catholic identity and faith formation, how it was a facet of my more complex identity, and how it influenced my personal and professional life. Fr. Jim Corrigan, a Catholic priest who was ordained later in life after many life challenges including divorce and alcoholism, changed my understanding of faith. His life experiences and resiliency helped me understand Catholic identity as a work in progress -- not perfect but messy and challenging and often hard to put into words. Our Catholic faith influences our life events and our life events influence our faith formation; in essence, a cyclic encounter of growth.

During one particular Principal meeting, he was invited to speak on his faith journey. I recall with great clarity how his story of self-struggle soaked into my heart and from that moment on it was almost as if a light bulb was turned on and I could see the contours of my Catholic identity across different landscapes; how it was forming and how it was changing with new understanding in relationship with others. My story of Catholic identity resonated with Fr. Jim’s narrative of self. It was a narrative of Catholic identity stained with imperfection and idiosyncrasies illustrating my own lived experience. In the mirror of Fr. Jim’s narrative of self, I could see my own reflection. Empathy allowed us to imagine ourselves in each other’s story. I began to ask questions never imagined: Who am I? How was I serving Catholic education? How was my Catholic leadership serving my school and community? These questions challenged me and led to more questions. The ebb and flow became increasingly evident the deeper I probed and the harder I challenged my own understanding of a Catholic identity.
Catholic Identity: Using Words to Express Faith Proves Difficult

We take the meaning of words and phrases for granted, especially those we commonly use in both professional and personal dialogue. Participants in this study agreed that ‘Catholic identity’ is one such ubiquitous phrase. Whether in a church, in a classroom, in a staffroom, or in a boardroom, the term Catholic identity is pitched around as a casual catchphrase. Although seemingly innocent, this presents challenges when Catholic educators are asked to outline the attributes of Catholic identity or provide a definition in the public arena; they seem to become tongue-tied. Participants corroborate that indeed Catholic identity is complex and being able to define and articulate the attributes is challenging. Theresa begins by saying:

If I talked to 100 people and read 100 books and said here it is in a nutshell…this is what Catholic identity is all about. If you ask Pope Francis he will give you a very good definition, but I don’t know if it would meet the needs of everybody because there are so many factors. Everybody uses the phrase but who can define it?

When considering how Catholic leaders might prepare themselves to better articulate the faith including their role and purpose as Catholic leaders, Charlie shares a personal experience.

One day our professor Fr. Daniel Smith (pseudonym) was asking who would be brave enough to offer the homily after the Gospel. Not a hand goes up. I thought, you know what, it’s an opportunity. I do a lot of public speaking. I thought well I don’t just want to read it to them. So, I put a lot of time and effort into it. Then at
the pulpit, I just had keywords. It was just a great experience. This helped me put my faith into words and find a way to express it to others.

Charlie conveys a key consideration in being able to articulate the Catholic faith. While, it is necessary to read the Scripture, Charlie does not stop there. He pushes forward and challenges himself to connect with the reading on a personal level of understanding and sharing it with others. This, Charlie admits, is not easy sharing that there is great insecurity about articulating Catholic identity with words. Participants attributed this overt tension felt by secular society to keep quiet when it comes to faith; it is a private matter. In Alberta, there is a barrage of reminders, from both insiders and outsiders to Catholic education that faith is personal and it should be kept out of the public sphere, especially in schools. Specifically, attention focusing on ensuring education does not exclusively privilege any particular religion, such as Catholicism. Participants cited media stories that allowed for reader comments on the value of Catholic schools, that opposed faith based education by comments such as, “the obsolete, arrogant and downright pitiful attempts by the Catholic Church to get with the times are never going to result in anything. Also, publicly funded faith-based education has no place whatsoever in 2015 Alberta” (Paula Simons, 2015, Antics Throw ECSD into Disrepute). Under such conditions, participants agreed that articulating one’s faith verbally requires confidence conviction, and clear understanding.

In addition, participants shared feelings that there is amplified pressure to redefine Catholic identity into something it is not. Theresa referenced a news article from The Edmonton Journal (2017), written by Janet French, whereby an Edmonton Public School Board former chairperson proposes that “allowing public schools in Edmonton to offer
Catholic faith alternative programming could save billions of dollars…why don’t we give the government a way to build one public school that’s an umbrella, that includes Catholic programs…(I) acknowledge this idea may not be popular with people who believe religion has no place in public schools” (February 6, 2011)

All participants agreed that such discourse continues to create layers of confusion to what exactly is a Catholic identity, making it increasingly difficult to articulate by insiders and easily misunderstood by outsiders; resulting in silence. Barry suggests that what is being created is a “counterfeit” version of Catholic identity that is not authentic:

I think the first thing is that when I think of Catholic identity; I think too often that we can conflate Catholic identity with Christian identity. Sometimes we fall short of differentiating that. Of course we’re Christians as Catholics but we’re a particular brand of Christianity. I’m very conscious of the idea that it is specifically a Catholic articulation of Christianity. It means that Christ is at the center of it. It means that the Magisterium and the teaching authority of the Church are to be honoured, and celebrated, and respected. It means that we are part of a beautiful 2,000-year-old tradition. It’s not just the Protestant notion of just, you know, Jesus and me…it is also the Catholic notion of Jesus and us.

Barry’s understanding of Church suggests an ecclesiology of both Church as Institution, referencing the authority of the Church in terms of the Magisterium, and Church as Herald, whereby the faithful community is unified through the teachings of Christ. Barry continued to explain that indeed Catholic identity finds expression in tangible symbols, traditions, and customs. Verbal articulation is important, however representation of Catholic identity can be communicated by emotion, action, art, music, and a variety of
 mediums. Words might fall short of conveying the complexity of Catholic identity within a 21st century context:

If there’s no going to church on Sundays, there’s no prayer in the home, or permeating your worldview as a family with a Catholic lens, then how does that speak to Catholic identity? As Catholics, I’m supposed to have a crucifix, I’m supposed to get my kids baptized, and I might get to church on Christmas and Easter. Catholic identity, I think is in many circles, increasingly secular, by secularized Catholics. It’s being redefined into something that it really wasn’t meant to be.

It is difficult to pinpoint what Catholic identity is or is not meant to be. Even more challenging is trying to determine who should be responsible for determining what it is.

Barry furthers this discussion with the following example:

When we talk about Catholic teachers reducing this beautiful 2,000-year-old tradition to ‘nice’ it’s just a complete undercutting of our whole tradition and it’s really an insult to our Catholic identity. What’s it’s doing is passing off a counterfeit identity. We’re more than just being nice. Part of the real identity of what it means to be Catholic is for people to understand that we’re a people of destiny. We were created to live in this world, but more importantly, we’re created for the next…to become saints. Do we understand that we have an eternal destiny stamped on our soul? That we have a God who wants us to be with him for all of eternity? Kids are always getting that message in Catholic schools. Sometimes teachers feel uncomfortable talking like that. But, also, I wonder, do they believe it themselves?
Thomas, likewise, expressed that Catholic identity has been reduced to bare bones semantics by media and by special interest groups such as, Support our Students (https://www.supportourstudents.ca, 2017), advocating for one publicly funded school system. They claim religion has no place in schools and should be practiced solely in the private sphere. It is the viewpoint of participants in this study that the defining attribute/s of Catholic identity, which have proved difficult to express, are not only being misunderstood, but are being incorrectly defined or not defined at all by both Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Such a convoluted defensive response to critics, further contributes to a divisive rift that could potentially prove to be insurmountable.

Additionally, silence, specifically within the role of Catholic educational leadership, could result in the inability to create a school culture permeated with faith. Is Catholic identity then simply left to chance – if no one can speak it how can it be lived? Perhaps, then, Catholic education should be left as a parental responsibility, as it is done in some other provinces and parts of the world. Participants concluded that creating and co-creating understanding and articulation of faith is difficult and requires trusting and caring relationships where vulnerabilities can be expressed. Theresa repeatedly expressed that even after a long and exhausting day, she purposefully and respectfully listened to her teachers, students, and parents. She states:

If they wanted to talk I was there to listen, and I would never judge or turn anyone away. I cared about what they had to say, and I genuinely tried to model this every day. I really believe that these conversations helped us understand our faith so that we could put it into words.
It has taken me a lifetime of living, a 30-year educational career, and doctoral studies to understand and admit to my own inability to articulate Catholic identity. Simply using the words Catholic identity, well that seemed to suffice for the expectations of the eleven different schools I served. Hypocritical? Possibly. Ill prepared? Similar to my participants, I am witness to many young teachers explaining Catholic identity to their students as being a nice person. While I understand this starting point with young students, I certainly expected a more wholesome understanding and discussion with older students. It is important to note that in this context, “nice” navigates one out of complexity and potentially unwanted scrutiny. For a beginning teacher, this is a safe starting point because everyone can relate to an experience of someone being nice. This safe haven becomes a point of intersection where diversity of faith finds unity. It was my own lack of understanding that constituted a hasty and unfair judgement and I realize it now. How could I expect them to do what I still found challenging? This study revealed that it is not solely young teachers who find expressing Catholic identity difficult; Catholic educational leaders, in senior roles ranking through to elected trustee positions, find it difficult to talk about their Catholic identity.

While recognizing the importance of being able to articulate what constitutes Catholic identity, there is a multitude of perceptions from both insiders, those who self-identify as Catholics and outsiders, those who do not self-identify as Catholics. Participants express that Catholic identity constitutes understanding and loyalty to a two thousand year old story. Those considered insiders refer to language such as ‘living the gospel values’, ‘eternal destiny to sainthood’, ‘Jesus as role model’, ‘attending Mass on Sundays’, and ‘receiving the sacraments’, yet are unable to synthesize this to a cohesive
whole. These catch phrases often lack depth of understanding and do not contribute to a wholesome discourse where differences and variances can lead to new learning. McLaughlin (1996) identifies these phrases as “an important enemy to be identified in general educational debate (as) ‘edu-babble’ imprecise and platitudinous rhetoric which offers to educators a kind of spurious clarity in the form of slogans” (p. 137). Such phrases, according to McLaughlin (1996), “can sometimes bring discussion of the Catholic distinctiveness of the school to an end and give the impression that the matters at stake have been satisfactorily dealt with. But like ‘edu-babble’ in general, such phrases are primarily useful as spurs to deeper discussion, not as substitute for it” (p. 137).

Theresa brings forth an interesting consideration when she suggests that even if we had a definition of Catholic identity, it would not meet the needs of everybody because there are many factors to take into consideration. She edges on the idea of Catholic identity being uniquely expressed by individuals in accordance to their life experiences yet still hinges on some basic fundamental commonalities as people live out their faith. This in turn possesses difficulties in articulation of a singular notion of Catholic identity. Could this suggest that Catholic identity is understood, enacted, and embodied differently by Catholic educational leaders? Does the research question bear further relevance in the inquiry of where the expression of Catholic identity and Catholic identities merge and diverge for Catholic educational leaders? Tension in articulation remains highly problematic, and if Catholic educational leaders cannot articulate their Catholic identity, others will do it for them, possibly resulting in a misunderstood narrative of Catholic education/schooling. Consequently, the expression and articulation of Catholic identity
rests as a lynchpin for personal, professional, and societal understanding of the distinctiveness of Catholic education as a whole and Catholic identity in particular.

**Catholic Identity: Navigating the Tensions of Church and Classroom**

Participants consistently expressed the importance for Catholic educational leaders to have a firm understanding of a Catholic identity founded on Church teachings contributing to a common understanding of the mission and vision of Catholic schools. Without this, disjointed, incongruent, and incomplete notions of being a Catholic could possibly lead people astray and ultimately not bode well for the future existence of Catholic schools. Barry comments specifically to this understanding participants expressed:

Catholic identity in the 21st century, I think those fundamental, traditional church teachings, the Magisterium and all those things have to be in place. It’s just that now in the 21st century, we might have a different example. However, the fundamental truth of church doctrine and teaching, the traditional, they don’t change over time. Like you said how we give witness to them changes…you got it…. you got it exactly. For example, Christ is both human and divine, those are fundamental truths that don’t change.

In addition, Church authorities, as illustrated in Dulles ecclesiology of *Church as Institution*, influence how Catholic identity is defined in the 21st Century. One such document, *Gravissimum Educationis* (GE), was released at the end of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), and contains what is germane to the vision of Catholic education. Barry cites this document to support his understanding of how church documents help in the articulation of Catholic identity, specifically referencing how “the function of a
(Catholic school) is to create…a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity, to help youth grow according to the new creatures they were made through baptism as they develop their own personalities, and finally offer the whole of human culture to the news of salvation so that the knowledge the students gradually acquire of the world, life and man is illumined by faith” (GE,8). Barry explained how the apostolic authority of the Catholic Church is not only important for the individual; it is necessary for the communal growth of the Catholic faith. Barry expounds on his understanding of this relationship, illustrating an institutional ecclesiology of Church:

If our Bishop is telling us this is what Catholic identity looks like, it’s going to influence how I see myself as a Catholic educational leader. In turn, how I see myself as a Catholic educational leader is going to be in the service of growing Catholic identity at school. How we understand our Catholic identity is going to impact how we lead as well.

Charlie concurs, stating:

What is Catholic education supposed to be about? I think we need to go back to the foundational documents and statements. We need to reconnect with this and say, ‘but wait…this is part of who we are’.

Participants reiterated that having an understanding of Church teachings is a certainly a precursor to shaping, informing, and influencing Catholic identity. By building on a common understanding, it then becomes possible to construct a solid foundation upon which Catholic schools articulate a mission and vision of Catholic education in congruence with the church. Participants noted that it is problematic when church, exclusively viewed as Dulles institutional model, and classroom clash, be it reality or
appearance. Participants believe it is necessary for candid and open discourse between all stakeholders, including those ordained, consecrated, and the rest of the laity. Having witnessed such church and classroom tensions on the Alberta landscape, participants unanimously agreed that disrespectful dissent between groups does not bode well for public confidence in either the Catholic Church or Catholic schools. Theresa cited one such example that stemmed from disagreement between government, school boards, public interest groups, and the Archdiocese with regards to writing an Inclusive Policy. Because it appeared that a few Catholic trustees were creating policy without any consultation with parents, students, or clergy, and being challenged publically, one Catholic school trustee placed ownership on the Archbishop stating that, “Our Archbishop doesn’t have a pastoral bone in his body” (Lifesite News, 2015). Because of her relational tendency, Theresa considered this, as an exaggerated personal attack was not warranted.

Participants expressed fear, that within a ‘divide and conquer’ agenda of pitting leaders within the Catholic community against each other and publically vocalizing discord through the media, communication shutdown becomes imminent. This perception, with or without merit, could be storied as reflecting the real existence of internal tension among Alberta Catholics. Thomas shares:

Who is going to be the next lightening rod? There are agendas here and these agendas have taken on a life of their own. It could be about just getting rid of Catholic education. That has always been in the background. Stay out of the media and don’t respond. The less said the better. Let your communication department deal with the media. The forces are just trying to pick a fight.
This comment illustrates the divisiveness that can occur when Catholic educational leaders, across different landscapes, do not communicate. What resulted in this particular situation was a cacophony of dissonant public statements, all of which were susceptible to media interpretation and reporting. Thomas continues:

Let’s just do what we need to do in our building, in our schools, in our communities and not retaliate in the media. As a Catholic leader we provide our school communities with supports. We don’t brag about it, we don’t put ourselves on a pedestal; we don’t say we are holier than holy. As Catholic leaders we need to stay out of these agendas because we’re getting caught up into a whirlwind. We want to be under the radar. Whatever we do is quiet. If kids need something we’ll give it to them but the last thing we want is to get into the media.

Participants in this study agreed that if Catholic education is to remain strong in Alberta, where it is being challenged on a daily basis, there must be solidarity in working towards a common vision and mission and being able to articulate it to the broader society. There must be a willingness to critically discuss church teachings as they relate to Catholic education, and find common ground where neither envisioned Catholic identity nor Catholic education is compromised. Is this possible? Participants remained hopeful throughout the research conversations, wholeheartedly believing that if Catholic educational leaders inform themselves on understanding Church teachings, they will be able to authentically articulate the mission and vision of Catholic education alongside other Catholic and Non-Catholic leaders such as the Archbishop and the Minister of Education, across a broad and diverse educational landscape. Infighting, discord, misinterpretations, and an unwillingness or inability to engage in respectful and
meaningful dialogue, participants agreed, could ultimately be the demise of Catholic education. Barry states:

I ask myself what are we doing when internally we are fractured. It does not bode well when leaders are unable to articulate what the basic mission and vision is of Catholic education. This lack of basic understanding has led to the fracture we see all over the media. The scriptures say a house divided will fall. A house divided against itself, and right now this is, we’re divided against ourselves.

I recall the months when the debate surrounding the government mandated Inclusive Policy was a daily headline in the newspaper. Day after day, headline after headline, the spirit in my school deflated. This was due to the apparent defiance of Catholic districts willing to cooperate in the writing of a specific LGBTQ policy. I was embarrassed as a Catholic educator, thinking that such discord would be made publically and not resolved in a cordial and respectful manner. Participants stated discontent and were insulted with insinuations that Catholic classrooms were places of discrimination where the safety of children was questioned in accordance with sexual orientation. Board meetings where Trustees alleged LGBTQ children were being cruelly subjected to bullying without intervention not only infuriated staff but for the Catholic educational leaders in this study, we deemed it our responsibility to reassure our teachers that these allegations were unfounded and continue with “business as usual.” Bullying of any kind was swiftly handled. Respect of every child was at the forefront of our daily work. We were living out the mission and vision of our district and our school. We understood it, we embraced it, and we lived it. Our students were treated with dignity unconditionally regardless of their sexual orientation; however we could not speak on the behalf of all
Catholic educational leaders across the province. Participants agreed it was necessary to communicate; however, communication was not forthcoming from Catholic educational leaders. Silence plagued the educational landscape. It became apparent, through the layers of discussion with participants, that others were defining Catholic identity on their own terms. Rather than trying to understand the “other” and the assurance that Catholic classrooms respected the dignity of every child, the political Alberta landscape was plagued with inflammatory and hurtful claims. These accusations, according to the participants in this study, crossed the line of professionalism and hindered any respectful dialogue related to the classroom.

What gnawed at me is the irrefutable conflict being played out between the church and state resulting in both hierarchies being held hostage by the media and Catholic education left vulnerably open to scrutiny and judgement. Prior to this incident I did not feel in conflict with church teachings and I did not assume that they interfered with how I led a Catholic school community. In fact, I dare say, I was quite proud of my faith. Now I felt I had to take sides, although no one had explicitly asked me to, not my superintendent, not my colleagues, not my parish priest, not even my Archbishop. There were times I felt everyone had abandoned ship and taken sail in different directions. The antidote of silence for me was unnerving, as it created an uncomfortable feeling of emptiness and void in my understanding of a Catholic identity.

I recall years back having a transgender child in my school. Where the child went to the bathroom was never a public issue to be discussed, debated, or decided in the media. It was a personal matter handled with sensitivity between the family and the school. Trustees, the Archbishop, special interest activists, even the Minister of Education
were never involved for any type of consultation. Nor did I believe they should be. Their authority, however important for the safekeeping of their prescribed institutional identity, did not bear relevance within the context of a school setting where the collective intellectual resources were directed to respond to the needs of a child. I led my school community with student wellness central to all decisions within a respectful and collaborative model of leadership. Could I have been wrong in doing so? Were my colleagues leading their schools differently? Was my stance in such matters a product of ignorance? Was I being unfaithful to the Church, to colleagues? Was my Catholic identity so ill informed that I unknowingly lacked any faith formation relevant to my role? I don’t believe so. Seeds of doubt were being planted on the educational landscape and I was subject to the roots taking hold of who I believed myself to be as a Catholic educational leader. My Catholic identity was too complex and layered to be suffocated into silence. I was determined I would not let others, those who knew me the least, define me.

**Catholic Identity: Changing, Expanding, and Dynamic**

Participants highlighted how Catholic identity is not formed quickly or easily. It takes time and experience across different landscapes. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) reference John Dewey to explain this very concept:

In forming identity, “both the personal and the social are always present. People are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in a social context…experience grows out of other experiences, and lead to further experiences…there is always a history, it is always changing, and it is always going somewhere. (Identity) moves back and forth between the personal, and the
social, simultaneously thinking about the past, present, and future, and [doing] so in ever – expanding social milieus. (pp. 2-3)

Based on this understanding that identity is never static or fixed, my participants articulated their Catholic identity as always changing and expanding. Charlie shares how his decision to attend Newman Theological College was formative in his Catholic identity and provided him the opportunity of really learning about his faith:

Going to Newman Theological College was a great experience. I started to get to know people, and people started to get to know me. As a student, I’ve always been the class clown. I wasn’t that in the first class because we were taking it pretty seriously. We had student presentations so I got to let out a bit of me there. I met a great group of people. Now some of them I knew from teaching over the years. We were a real cohesive unity. It was a chance for me to learn more about my faith.

Interestingly enough, Charlie explains how he, as a result of better understanding his faith, became more confident in expressing it to others. Charlie attributes this to his studies at Newman, and being able to learn alongside colleagues who were also seeking to better understand their faith. It was in this relationship where faith was discussed, experiences shared, and questions asked where Charlie saw himself growing into his Catholic identity.

Barry further explains how life experience, maturity, and deeper understanding all contribute to one’s evolving understanding of Catholic identity and to think otherwise is short-sighted:
Someone could think of shaping, as this is who I am. That’s how I was born and raised. Well no, we grow, we evolve, and we change. If I’m the same person at 20 that I was at 60, yeah, we’ve got issues. I’m almost a little bit insulted when people say I haven’t seen you in 20 years, you haven’t changed. Really? I would hope that my core hasn’t changed and that I’m still fundamentally the same person but you would hope some other things have changed…. that I have grown and evolved. When I think of shaping Catholic identity to me it suggests shaping of the general contours of one’s identity.

Barry continues to illustrate that a Catholic identity is not fixed in one state and remains that way throughout life; it changes and is influenced by life experiences, people we meet, personal and professional learning:

It’s not static, it’s dynamic. Identity can kind of flex back and forth. It’s permeable so it can still be influenced but its your general structure …not this amorphous mass. To me I think about all of the external things that are happening, the events in life, that shape one’s identity that twist and turn it. When we talk about influencing, we are not just acted upon but we act upon the world and shaping other people’s identities. We need to think about how this identity in turn influences others. Once words burst into the world they take meaning. Words are powerful. Our words not only inform others but they are puzzle pieces revealing who we are to ourselves. This can’t be taken lightly. Words hold power.

*It has taken me a long time to understand what it means be Catholic and to be able to articulate my Catholic identity. For me it was a feeling that I expressed in a variety of ways, not often with words. As a musician, I found expression of my faith*
through the music I played. As an avid home cook, I expressed my faith through the hospitality I extended to friends and family around the dinner table. I did consider that I was wearing my Catholic identity on my sleeve. Others understood who I was within the context of my actions. Faith was personal: I never considered how my Catholic identity could possibly influence others.

After years of leadership experience, I realized other were not only watching my actions, but also listening to my words. It was a pivotal moment realizing that my Catholic identity had evolved from the personal to the professional and that the two domains were highly permeable. Like Barry and Charlie, I realized that how I expressed myself verbally and nonverbally mattered; words mattered, actions mattered. Leaders can learn how to manage a budget, interview for a staffing position, and even organize professional development. However, Catholic leadership requires a faith domain situated within the complexity that it is not a prescriptive formula, cannot be succinctly defined, and cannot be duplicated from one individual to the next. Because expression of Catholic identity is so complex it is often simplified as praying, going to church, trying to be a good person, and believing in God. Variations of Catholic identity exist simply because the journey is not marked, “start here” and after a few years “you have arrived.” As my participants suggested, Catholic identity is not a systematic process. It is not something that is developed and then remains the same. All participants expressed growth in faith formation due to many variables they encountered through experience, relationships, and time.
Catholic Education: Secular Workplace? Negotiating the Tension

Consequently, Catholic educational leaders in this study assert that Catholic identity is not only a personal journey it has now become a matter of public inquiry. Publically funded Catholic schools are squarely situated within an unfolding discourse. Accordingly, Catholic identity and Catholic education are inseparable, constantly in a reciprocal cycle of shaping, informing, and influencing each other. Participants asserted that indeed working in a Catholic school not only informed their Catholic identity; it constantly influenced their leadership role.

During the course of our careers, Theresa, Barry, Thomas, and I all had the experience of working in seconded positions for the Ministry of Education and a university. During our conversations, we had the opportunity to compare and contrast our work experience from Catholic to non-Catholic secular settings. Participants shared that they starkly noted the difference from being in a Catholic educational setting. Not only did it require an adjustment in outward behaviour, but also participants stated having to suppress their internal faith-based sentiments and expectations such as praying, wearing religious jewellery, and watching their language. This left them feeling isolated and disconnected from others and hypocritical to their faith. Specifically, it was difficult to live their faith solely in the personal realm detached from the professional. Thomas shares his experience of working for Alberta Education:

The big piece for me was going to Alberta Education. You don’t realize how much you miss being in a 24/7 faith environment. You go to work in the morning and you don’t share or observe your faith until you go home at night, and on the weekends when you go to church. It was a very different experience for me since I have
always been in a Catholic school. I stopped wearing my cross at Alberta Education. I used to touch the cross a lot, make sure it was straight. I kept reaching for it realizing it wasn’t there. As soon as I got back to a Catholic school division, the first thing I did, is, put it back on again. But just a little thing like that, I felt out of place. When I finally left my government job and got back into Catholic education, it was like night and day. I don’t know. It’s like you’re starved of something and then get it back.

Why the compelling feeling of not wearing his cross? What else could be contributing to this sense of starvation? Thomas explains:

Because I felt awkward in terms of everybody’s looking, “Well who is this guy, some religious freak or something?” I felt odd wearing it. I found what it was like to be a minority. I wasn’t prepared to draw that much attention to myself.

It is interesting to note that Thomas was not asked by anyone to abstain from wearing his cross. This was a self-directed action motivated by personal will. Such an action does demonstrate the internal tension felt when someone feels self-conscious about their faith and simply wants to fit in unnoticed. Such an experience could certainly evoke a greater sense of empathy for others who are not able to hide their religious identity. While the intense feeling of belonging can certainly be overpowering, the notion that one might be excluded because of religious jewellery appears utterly absurd in what is concerned an inclusive and diverse work environment.

Theresa recalls a similar experience:

For 38-39 years I worked in a Catholic school district and so our behaviour, our day-to-day behaviour was based on, our Gospel values and treating others with
dignity and respect and always modeling Christ-like behaviours. So then last summer, I went to work on a construction site. It is a very different world and I was taken aback. Some of these guys were not being good Christians in the way that they treated each other, in the way they spoke to each other. It was very difficult for me to work there. Change is difficult and I was experiencing it first hand.

Theresa realized that a construction site is quite different from a Catholic school on many levels including the possibility that workers are not necessarily Christian. Working on a construction site was a whole new world that had more roar than bite and where male assertiveness was constantly witnessed. Although comparing a construction site with a Catholic school appears unlikely, there is an underlying level of congruency with Catholic institutions excluding women in ordination and senior leadership roles.

Theresa expressed this connection in terms of how she often felt insignificant and powerless rather than a leader, a position she had held for her entire career. She explains:

It was a completely different world and so hard to adjust to. It wasn’t acceptable to me and yet there was nothing I could do to change it. I still continued to be myself where I could…talk to people a certain way and treat them a certain way but I was hoping that maybe if I was there for a long time, maybe those guys would start modeling that kind of behaviour. I wasn’t there long enough and I don’t think I could’ve survived long enough to be there to see if that would happen. There was never any talk about religion. It was so far off the radar that I could never say anything about that. You don’t start the day with a prayer. You start the day with a buzzer.
This example, provided by Theresa, demonstrates the power Catholic educational leaders emanate in creating a Catholic culture within their school. Within the Catholic school, Theresa had the power to begin the school day in accordance to her judgement. This new working environment created a shift of power leaving Theresa to follow a culture determined by others. Switching roles from leader to follower requires a willingness to relinquish power. To this end, Theresa explains, requires a Catholic educational leader to have a strong understanding of self and others:

Our Catholic school community will not grow in faith formation if the leader doesn’t live out Catholic values. Sure if you work in a public school, you might not have to be so outward in your faith. But in a Catholic school, you wear your faith on your sleeve every day.

Theresa alludes to a tension brewing in her sense of belonging. While Thomas felt belonging in a secular setting required removing his religious jewellery, and Theresa suggests faith should be worn on one’s sleeve, both of them underscore that outwardly demonstrating faith was easier within a Catholic workplace, where a common mission and vision is embodied, and the Catholic educational leader has the authority to expect everyone to conform to the culture. Within such a balance of conformity and inclusion resides a tension not easily resolved. Feeling like a minority, as suggested by Thomas, might be what non-Catholic students experience when attending a Catholic school. As a result, Thomas expressed gaining a deeper sense of empathy and awareness when working with diverse students and families. Developing a Catholic identity for these students might include the feeling of belonging and welcome. The security of knowing that their beliefs are respected and talked about promotes a culture of well being for all
students. These are serious consideration for the Catholic educational leader striving to create a welcoming, safe, and inclusive culture for a diversity of students.

I have been attending Catholic school for 44 years either as a student, or teacher, or administrator. One might judge that indeed my life has been sheltered living in the solace of my Catholic bubble. The outside world has burst my bubble numerous times. In conversation with both Theresa and Thomas, I share my experience of working at the secular university in a seconded position for two years. I felt out of place right from the start. This was a new space for me which I did not wholly understand, I felt like a fish out of water; unsettled. It struck me, during the course of this study, how students feel isolated and alone when they are new to a school and certainly when they are not Catholic.

After several months of trying to learn the routines and the established culture at the University, what struck me was the sense that there was a lack of a unifying mission and vision. Yes, certainly we understood our role being to ensure student teachers had practicum placements each term, and to provide support. I shared a small office with a retired teacher, coincidentally from the same school district I worked with. Our discussions were lively and we would often reminisce of our times back at our schools. We commented that transitioning to this new job left us both feeling awkward and reserved. I believe these feelings stemmed from a lack of rituals or symbols that suggested a common mission or vision, something we were both very familiar with. In Catholic schools, our walls are full of symbols and prayers that unite our community in faith providing a sense of security rooted in common tradition. These symbols and prayers
portray elements of the Catholic story and contribute to the articulation of Catholic identity.

The awkwardness I initially felt in my seconded position was exacerbated knowing that I had to be careful with language that made any religious inference, yet not cross the line where I would consider myself losing touch with my faith. I was trying to create a story to live by working at this job, a story that would satisfy this particular context at this particular time. At times, I experienced disconnected from my colleagues as I felt we shared nothing in common other than the immediate work to be done. I would catch myself thinking of a task, such as having a prayer ready for the start of a meeting, and realizing it was unnecessary. I would catch myself saying words that we in Catholic school say to students and staff, such as the grace of God is with you. I would stop short before the words were actualized deeming them as inappropriate. This happened time and time again. It occurred to me that practicing my faith within my work environment, in what is a privileged position, was something I had taken for granted. I was left wondering how I would maintain my sense of belonging and faith for the next two years.

There was a fear brewing inside of me, a fear that worsened with guilt, knowing I was in a sense betraying myself and who I had come to understand myself in my Catholic identity. The tension existed, in that at the same time, I did not want to sound like the religious fanatic spewing off being the preacher type. I wanted to express my belief that the Catholic faith can help sustain students in a nurturing and caring environment, instilling a common humanity of good will, but I lacked the ability to articulate such a message. This insecurity led me to be cautious and that was frustrating because I had to pretend being someone I was not in both realities. I recall the first time the Dean asked
me to speak with student teacher wishing to change their placement to a public school from a Catholic. A change in placement presented logistical problems, therefore convincing students to remain in their Catholic placement, was preferred. While I was thrilled with this responsibility, I soon realized that I was the only facilitator asked to do this. My other colleagues remained neutral, not commenting, leaving me to feel quite isolated as the only Catholic educator charged with this responsibility to ask these students to remain in their Catholic placements. I felt this problematic as it contributed to my discomfort of feeling different and possibly limiting the program experience of the students. Reflecting on this experience years later, I realized that this was not problematic. In fact, I had the perfect opportunity to express my Catholic identity within a different context.

I question the experience of myself and my participants in working in a secular setting, wondering if we really felt out of place due to the distinctiveness of Catholic culture or our own naiveté for working nowhere else. One might point out that working on a construction sight has little in common with an educational setting, thus the feeling of awkwardness was more based on the working in an unfamiliar context. For myself, having grown up in a Catholic family, attended exclusively Catholic schools as a student, and having worked an entire career as a Catholic educator, one would very well expect to feel out of place. I felt the tug of nostalgia as I questioned the memory of my Catholic bubble.

In retrospect, I recognize that my time at the University provided a diverse landscape for learning and growing, both professionally and personally. It is only through the retelling of this experience to others that I realize our feelings of isolation
stemmed from change and that possibly with time, we would adapt wholly to our new environments. Interestingly enough, my participants did not mention the opportunity of working elsewhere as contributing to their learning and growth. They recall feeling out of place and isolated, unable to express an integral part of their Catholic identity. Wearing the cross on his lapel was an integral part of Thomas’ identity. Feeling compelled to not wear it during his secondment, he explains, “I felt awkward in terms of everybody looking, well, who is this guy, some religious freak or something.”

Reflecting on my experience I am now able to consider that my response could have been different while working at the University. Change is always difficult and it takes time to adjust within any given circumstance. Did my participants and I feel this way due to the distinctiveness or the familiarity of Catholic education? Participants raise a significant tension that is important when considering the privilege that Catholic schools continue to have in being able to live their faith within their work. Most often, people have to keep these two identities separate, negotiating between each and attempting to integrate their Catholic faith in the context of a larger and diverse context. Although this is challenging, it is important for Catholic educational leaders to question and examine how Catholic education serves 21st century education. From this holistic understanding, coherence of Catholic identity at work, in the community, and with their families remains an integral formative component to their leadership role given that they are leading a faith community.

**Catholic Education: Inherent Dignity of Every Child**

Participants in this study consistently articulated that Catholic education is rooted in the unwavering truth that all children are God’s children, created in his likeness and
image, deserving of unconditional love and inherent dignity. This is the Catholic conception of the dignity of the human person. Public schools certainly treat children with dignity and respect and strive to provide safe and caring inclusive learning environments for all students. However, Catholic schools differ in the theological articulation and conceptualization of this belief by referencing God and illustrating examples from the Parables of Jesus. Catholic education endeavours to place the child at the center of all decisions, meaning that the welfare and best interest of the child is always the goal. While appearing to have the same purpose, Theresa states:

I have to remember to treat the students, the teachers, the parents, the other members of the community, all with dignity and respect. It doesn’t matter if you’re upset with them; they are also upset with you. It doesn’t matter what happens. As the leader you need to remind them that everyone is made in the image and likeness of God. So, in a way you’re talking to Jesus. That’s how I always reminded myself.

Theresa explains how Catholic educators have worked fervently to advance inclusive education; specifically, to get away from labeling (coding) students such as having particular behavioural, attention deficit, or emotional/anxiety designations. Some students are coded by their medical conditions such as ‘autism’ or ‘Down syndrome’ to the degree that these labels are not life affirming and serve as barriers to human dignity. Although such labels sometimes may serve a financial benefit for accessing proper care, they must remain firmly rooted as life affirming. Theresa feels strongly opposed to these labels, believing that all children, regardless of ability or disability, are a gift from God, deserving of every opportunity to reach their potential. Although Theresa’s position is not
unique as other agencies, including non-Catholic, are also moving towards inclusive language whereby labels of disability are replaced into attributes marking ability. Theresa emphasized that educators were caring about their student’s wellbeing before the government required every school district to have safe and caring inclusive policies. Miller (2006) reminds educators of this obligation, “The specific purpose of a Catholic education is the formation of boys and girls who will be good citizens of this world, loving God and neighbour and enriching society with the leaven of the gospel, and who will be good citizens of the world to come, thus fulfilling their destiny to become saints” (p.20). Sainthood, as explained by Theresa:

It’s what we as Catholic strive for in our life. Children with special needs are gifts from God and as Catholic leaders; we have to support our teachers working with them. Both the teachers and the students are important and each one is special. As leaders, we have to acknowledge the potential and worth of everyone.

Theresa critically shares her frustration with how children continue to be labeled regardless of good intentions. Catholic education is founded on the philosophy, which includes dignity, love, and compassion being equally important for LGBTQ students. She explains with an example, however still using the label LGBTQ within the category of psychological disorders, which reflects thinking along out-dated editions of The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders:

It seems that we are moving backwards by special interest groups categorizing children with distinct labels; autistic, oppositional defiant, and LGBTQ just to name a few. That’s not what we do in Catholic education. I had a teacher who refused to integrate students from the behaviour program into his classroom. I told
him, you have to take a chance because these are children. We accept all kids and do not segregate or label. That is our philosophy. As a Catholic leader you have to stand up for the faith and what you believe in. If some of these teachers say that they are not teaching that child. Well I am sorry…this is not the place for you. You can’t go against your core values and belief system and honouring the diversity of every child is what we are about.

Barry expounds on how both Catholic and Public schools certainly educate the child, but it is unlikely that in a Public school, teachers would refer to a loving God in the midst of their educational experience. Alongside this Barry claims that Religious education is required in the formation of Catholic identity:

As Catholics, we believe in educating the whole child. And for us, the entirety of the person includes the spiritual dimension. So not to include a religious education component is to educate something less than what’s presented to us which is a child. So, what you’re asking is to only educate 80% of them or 90% of them. From a Catholic perspective, we can’t do education to its fullest unless the system allows us to do religious formation.

The Church document, *Lay Catholics in Schools* (1982) published by the Congregation for Catholic Education states, “…the school must be concerned with constant and careful attention to cultivating in students the intellectual, creative, and aesthetic faculties of the human person” (p. 12). This includes a holistic approach to education with spirituality as a fundamental aspect. Barry gives a clear example of how this is manifested in academic achievement. Here the inherent dignity of every child far surpasses any achievement grade on any particular subject:
We have to remember that behind an achievement number is the face of a child. The face of the child speaks to their possible love of music or art. The joy a student experiences feeling accepted and cared for. In Catholic education, we must be cautious that we don’t sacrifice the child in pursuit of that numerical metrics of success. We have to be careful about what we’re willing to sacrifice to make that happen.

Barry further explores the concept that Catholics believe every child is created in the image of God; that God loves everyone by his or her inherent human dignity. In today’s world, it is very important for our students to trust in the love of God. Messages of inadequacy saturate our young people ranging from body image, peer pressure, how they dress, what music they listen to, how many “likes” they acquire on social media, or how popular they are with their peers. God’s love and acceptance is their constant and transcends all these worldly criteria. Love is constant and not predicated on any set expectations. God’s love is unconditional. This is so important for kids especially in junior high where there is so much peer pressure and youth are so concerned about who likes them or what clothes their wearing or how athletic they are. Barry explains that God does not judge, He only loves:

Their peer group is constructing their little identities but there’s someone (God) who knitted them when they were in the womb…their identity is being a child of God with an eternal destiny to be with him.

How do Catholic leaders ensure that this understanding and commitment remain at the forefront of building a Catholic identity? My years of Catholic education leadership experience would direct me to believe that this is not an easy task given the influence of
social media, peer pressure, and even the developmental spiritual maturity of the child. Participants referenced the Catholic document entitled *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (1998), written by the Congregation for Catholic Education, which states, “The Catholic school sets out to be a school for the human person and of human persons. The person of each individual human being, in his or her material and spiritual needs, is at the heart of Christ’s teaching. This is why the promotion of the human person is the goal of the Catholic school” (p.7). I, alongside my participants, respect that both Catholic and Public schools strive to ensure the dignity of every child reaching their full potential; however, it is in their unique articulation of this objective that the distinctiveness of Catholic schools transpires.

**Catholic Education: Christ as Unity**

In one particular Catholic school district in Alberta, the front entrance in each of its 90 schools is adorned with an image depicting this message, “Be it known to all who enter here that Christ is the reason for this school. He is the unseen but ever-present teacher in its classes. He is the model for its staff and the inspiration for its students.” Explicit articulation of Christ’s beliefs is indeed the reason for Catholic schools being distinct from secular Public schools. Rymarz (2016) states, “the primary goal of a Catholic school is the development of the human person within the context of a deepening relationship with Christ” (p. 17). Catholic schools talk about the life of Christ, the teachings of Christ through the parables, and the inspiration Christ provides in the life of those who choose to be his follower. Catholic educators, through their vocation and calling, are called to believe that Christ is everywhere all the time. Without this foundational belief, it can be argued, Catholic schools need not exist. Participants
expressed that Catholic schools are places where an encounter with Christ is essential to
the mission and vision of Catholic education. Theresa articulates:

If we don’t talk about Christ or nurture a relationship with Christ, or learn about
the work of Christ, then what’s the point? We would just be a smaller version of
the public system and at that point, you might as well shut us down.

Charlie suggests that all who choose Catholic education need to fully understand
the commitment they are undertaking in articulating the life of Christ to the school
community. Charlie illuminates how one particular student challenged his understanding
of Catholic education referencing the time he reached out to a troubled child:

I remember having a student in my office and you couldn’t leave him alone.
Different times. I said, “Kevin, you are coming with me.” We get through the door
of Safeway and he heads to the bubble gum machine. Well, he used a plastic bread
twist and he turned it to resemble a quarter. Next thing, he’s turning the knob and
out comes the candies. The weekend before, he was involved in a carjacking.
Here’s a kid and I’m thinking one weekend he’s car jacking, and the next he’s
going to the bubble gum machine. Kevin had a tough home life and I knew that
the academics weren’t really important to him. I tried to build a relationship with
him hoping one day he would open up to me.

Charlie provides an excellent example of how he, as a Catholic principal, worked with
children experiencing difficulty. The example he shares demonstrates how he tries to
accompany the student, reminding himself that Christ is present in the encounter with this
student. Bringing a student to Safeway requires a different level of interaction than what
might be found in Math class or the principal’s office. The difficulties, although
seemingly insurmountable, Charlie explained, are always laced with hope. He believes that it is the duty of the Catholic educator to help students build a relationship with Christ through prayer, so that a sense of hope and resiliency is nurtured. Charlie asserts that indeed Public schools are also hopeful institutions whereby students are supported, “minus the spiritual component.” What remains distinct with Catholic schools is, as Rymarz (2016) explains, “[that] the Catholic school must seek ways to animate and sustain this vital relationship with Christ…this is not done in a didactic fashion, but invites the students into a genuine dialogue and exchange” (p. 17).

Similarly, Thomas explains how he, regardless of how frustrated he might be, strived to ensure that all students were supported with infinite opportunity to flourish, Christ being the role model of infinite hope by accompanying us in all situations and not tossing us to the sidelines:

Teachers sometimes want students out of their hair. So, I hated that black and white rule that is a child does this…then the conduct policy says this. I hated black and white. Sometimes teachers wanted it for their benefit and it wasn’t always to the benefit of the child. I always say it depends where the need of that child at that moment. Because the needs are different the expectations would be different. I would expect the teachers in the classroom to be caring, and accepting, and forgiving. I always wanted students leaving my office to know that it wasn’t them that I didn’t like; it was their actions and their choices I didn’t like. I always wanted them to leave feeling valued. That was really important to me.

All participants identify prayer as the lifeblood of Catholic schools. They express how not only is it unifying in so far as expressing a common vision, it is a way by which
all members of a Catholic school nurture a relationship with Jesus. As Thomas states, prayer is essential in Catholic schools:

Praying is a big piece of our Catholic faith. In school, we can get together as a group and support each other through prayer. It’s at those times where we need it the most that we have that option to pray. That is a big part of our Catholic identity.

Barry explains how he incorporated prayer when dealing with student conduct:

Whenever I disciplined kids, we virtually always ended in prayer. Billy, are you going to work this out? Jesus loves you, he’s wildly in love with you, he’s wildly in love with Billy and he’s wildly in love with me. You know what God wants us to do right now? He wants us to put this behind us, so I think we need to pray. I think we need to thank God for helping us sort out our differences, and I think we need to ask Him for a blessing I’ve done it on occasion, where I get the two kids to hold hands as we pray. Just think those hands were in a fight a few minutes ago, and they’re now holding each other’s hands to pray together. Thirty, forty years later, those same kids could say, “I remember in my Catholic school when my principal prayed with me and made me hold hands…that wouldn’t happen in a public school.” It would leave an indelible imprint because it was in a Catholic school.

How do Catholic educational leaders elicit such an important goal from their staff and students? Developing a relationship with Jesus would appear to be quite an abstract endeavour, however prayer allows for concrete expression. As expressed by Charlie, Theresa, Barry, and Thomas, this is foundational to the mission of Catholic schools. Jesus
is encountered upon invitation through prayer. Catholic children are taught prayers such as the Our Father and Hail Mary from a young age. When in school, these same prayers fill the hallways with common voice. These prayers articulate the abstract of being Catholic by reaffirming key beliefs such as heaven, gratitude, and forgiveness. These prayers are pathways to Jesus.

Although not an easy undertaking, explains how he has arrived at understanding that Catholic schools are distinct from their public school counterparts through the vocabulary used:

I think we have a common thread with the Public system but we are allowed freely to talk about Jesus, which is God. That is the fabric of our faith: whereas, in the public schools, there are many different faiths. It makes me think about Christmas. In public schools, you have to be careful how you say it. We can focus on our meaning of Christmas from a Catholic perspective and why we celebrate Advent and how we celebrate Christmas. It is an opportunity to celebrate our faith in our schools. We can talk about the Messiah. We can talk about the sacraments and it’s a common language. It is that whole permeation piece. We can talk about our faith all day not just in Religion class or during a celebration.

Thomas, using this example, is referring to the secular nature of a public school where the term secular refers to the meeting ground of many different faiths where no one faith has precedence. Referencing the Church document, *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, Rymarz (2016) encapsulates, “Not all students in Catholic schools are members of the Catholic Church; not all are Christians…the religious freedom and the personal conscience of individual students and their families
must be respected. And this freedom is explicitly recognized by the Church” (p. 43). Thomas acknowledges that a Catholic school comprises of students from different faiths, and respecting this diversity is foundational. This understanding is consistent with Cook (2007) who states, “Catholic schools must broaden their interpretation of Catholic imagination to accommodate the diversity of faith traditions that exist in the Church and school populations – Hispanic, African, American, Native American, to name a few” (p.8). The tension manifests as the Catholic educational leader alongside teachers, balances honouring and explicating different faith traditions without compromising their formation of a Catholic identity. Scanlan (2009) explains that Catholic social teaching “is directed by the Church to all people of good will, including Catholic followers, followers of other faith traditions, and followers of no faith tradition” (p. 7). Bibby and Reid (2016) confirms that as of 2015 “there are approximately 2,000 Catholic schools across Canada, with a total enrolment of more than 800,000 students” (p.130). Given the number of students attending Catholic schools and considering the multitude of faiths, participants agreed, posits tension regarding diversity and conformity. While respecting the diversity of students is important, participants remained adamant that the Catholic identity of schools is firmly rooted in the teachings of Christ and that a diluted variation would undermine Catholic identity.

*I question what a ‘diluted’ Catholic identity would necessitate. Is it based on the number of instructional minutes teaching religion, the number of Catholic teachers employed, the number of prayers during the day, or by the number of Catholic students enrolled? Such numerical evidence might indicate that the validity of Catholic identity may be captured with numerical data, simply put, that it can be measured; that it is*
quantifiable. Believing this would suggest that Catholic identity is static and requires a one size fits all philosophy whereby it reaches a determined standard of measure and criterion. Qualitative differences in Catholic identity, although more elusive and difficult to express, are situated in one’s understanding of church and religion and how it resonates. How Catholic identity becomes expressed becomes an individual articulation. Participants in this study, all having worked with diverse student populations, did not express angst concerning identity working with non-Catholic students. They expressed a welcoming of all students and their families who supported faith based education with Jesus as the cornerstone.

I found Christ in a variety of landscapes. During my time as a music teacher I believed that my Catholic identity was rooted in my musical Catholic identity. As an English teacher, I would argue it was better aligned as a literary Catholic identity. Neither identities diluted or diminished the other, but rather were equally relevant to who I understood myself to be at the time. Ultimately, if Christ is the reason for Catholic education, Christ is the reason for my Catholic identity. It can be argued that people find Christ on their own terms. This could very well be the filter for understanding why those desiring a faith-based education chose Catholic schools.

Understanding Christ as the centrality of Catholic education has informed my Catholic educational leadership with regards to registering Catholic and non-Catholic students. I call it my litmus test. Quite simply, I ask one pivotal question: Are you willing to learn about Jesus, talk about how he lived, and ready to explore how he can serve as a guide in our own life? I have not experienced difficulty honouring students and their families of different faiths because I rely on this foundation to clearly articulate
the purpose of any Catholic school. This issue, in my experience, is a relational consideration, where open and frank discussions are had regarding the expectations of parents choosing to enrol their child in a Catholic school. It is within these conversations where the needs of the students are taken into account first and foremost. The responsibility of the Catholic educational leader is to mediate such relationships, remaining firm in articulating that a Catholic school is rooted in the teachings of Christ. Certainly, as a Catholic educational leader, there is list of responsibilities such as financial budgeting, instructional leadership, and staff management needing constant attention; it is in my judgement, imperative to embody Christ in all aspect of a Catholic school.

Catholic Education: Denominational Rights Serve Parent Choice

*Gravissimum Educationis*, a document stemming from Vatican Council II, the Church’s Declaration on Christian Education, reveals the Church’s stance regarding educational choice. Section six begins with the following statement:

Parents, who have a primary and inalienable duty and right in regard to the education of their children, should enjoy the fullest liberty in their choice of school. The public authority, therefore, whose duty it is to protect and defend the liberty of the citizens, is bound to ensure that…parents are truly free to select schools for their children in accordance with their conscience. (Holy See, 1975, p. 731)

Charlie referred to an article written by Feehan (2015) stating, “the Courts recognize that Catholic parents would be entitled to permeate their religion in their school system by exclusive control of pedagogy, exclusive control of maintenance and support of
the system, the power to hire, promote, and fire teachers on denominational grounds, and
the exclusive management and control of all aspects of the educational system” (p. 5). As
explained by Sarnecki (2015), “We need our Catholic schools to be Catholic – our
teachers to embody the faith, our administrators and trustees, through their faith
leaderships, to show the way of Christ. We need to be Catholic. We need to be different”
(Catholic Dimension, 2017, p. 8). Regardless, participants remain concerned that
denominational rights risk becoming dissolved because Catholic education, in an attempt
to keep up with the secular times, will likely erode the essence of its primary mission.

Charlie explains:

What is key...are the denominational rights that we have to hire Catholics.

Catholic education is action based. Witness means you are living the faith and
you’re modeling it. Being a witness is powerful. Students have to see who I am as
a Catholic educator, and it’s not just being a Catholic educator 8:00-4:00, Monday
to Friday. Public schools have excellent teachers. Our teachers have to say and
live the Gospel as taught by Jesus Christ.

Parental choice for Catholic education remains strong, with both Catholic and
non-Catholic student enrolment steadily increasing in the province of Alberta and
throughout Canada. Rymarz (2016) writes, “Rather than seeing interest and enrolment
decline in parallel with the growing disaffiliation with the Church, Catholic schools are
growing both in number and in total enrolment” (p.12). Referencing the work of Rymarz,
Thomas stated:

We probably have about 40% non-Catholic students attending our schools.

They’re coming for a reason. They just want faith in general because at the end of
the day the basic tenets of most faiths are the same, you know love your neighbour, love people, be good to others. So whether they believe in God or Allah or Jesus or whoever, the basic elements are similar. They are looking for faith based educational choice.

These attributes are points of intersection amongst a diversity of faiths and once again participants elicit that parents are identifying Catholic schools as teaching these attributes explicitly. While Catholic schools focus on the teachings of Christ, Thomas’ comment also suggests a contradiction of commitment; are Catholic schools teaching about Allah or Christ? What is the scope of a faith-based educational choice? Thomas clarifies by referencing the Religion 35 Course Catholic schools offer high school students: *World Religions: A Canadian Catholic Perspective*. This course, according to Char Deslippe (2011) who helped write the original course in Ontario:

- explores some of the basic tenets of major religious faiths -- Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, native spirituality and Catholicism -- and depicts similarities or dissimilarities with Catholicism. It also explains interreligious dialogue going on between the Church and other religions…it tells us that we want to be open to all faiths and we want our students to learn about them as well as their own… we want to help kids to understand that not every religion is the same. It's important because in the 21st century and in this culture our students need an understanding of the role that religion plays in our growth as humans in terms of being a whole person (and) that other people have spirituality as well, even though it might not be expressed in rituals the same as our Catholic faith is.

(https://www.wcr.ab.ca/This-Week/Stories/entryid/1114)
Participants agreed that understanding one’s faith in relation with others is an important component of Catholic identity. While acknowledging that diversity of spiritual expression is important, Theresa asserts, that Catholic schools are obliged to respect parental choice for Catholic education and this means informing them on what a Catholic education entails. When parents choose to enrol their children in a Catholic school, Theresa advises that Catholic leaders must be able to articulate how Catholic schools differs from the Public school. The need for parents to make informed choices regarding their child’s education cannot be understated. This requires the Catholic educational leader, according to Theresa to engage in meaningful discussion surrounding the goals of a Catholic education. Theresa explains:

Our Catholic leaders really need to have a strong sense of Catholic identity. We have to know the differences ourselves. We have to keep getting at the core of how we are different than the Catholic school down the street. People are questioning the Catholic school system and some feel it’s discriminatory because why should the Catholics have their own school system and not the Muslims or not the Jews. They are being very articulate about dissolving Catholic education. We have to in turn arm ourselves and become more articulate and more focused on why we are Catholic and what it means to be a Catholic educator working in Catholic education. We have to communicate this clearly to parents when they register their children in our schools.

According to Theresa, such a stance requires Catholic educational leaders to create a distinctly Catholic environment where faith is visible. Where it can speak for itself:
As Catholic leaders, we can talk about Gospel values out in the open. Your days show that there are prayers and faith around. That’s not happening in public schools. You don’t go in and find a crucifix. You don’t go in and find a Bible and a prayer center or a Chapel. We have the distinct luxury of being able to articulate our values and our beliefs.

Theresa references the importance of Catholic teachers as critical to the future of Catholic education where the visible faith is personified in the classroom. Denominational rights of Catholic schools provide the freedom to hire teachers that characterize the distinctiveness of Catholic education through their lived witness of the faith. Theresa captures this by describing Catholic teachers as “the action heroes.” They are the real-life role models of Catholic faith that have incredible influence on the faith formation of students. Rymarz (2016) explains, “Catholic school communities need enough individuals who have a vital and enduring relationship with Christ and who are prepared to witness to this…teachers are called not only to be exemplary professionals, but also to animate and cultivate the unique religious atmosphere that is the essential precursor to permeation” (p. 21).

Charlie ponders why we as Catholic educators have become so complacent over time. While he acknowledges that denominational rights ensure parental choice in faith-based education and hiring practices are aligned to secure teachers of faith instructing students, Catholic education cannot rely on such factors to remain unchallenged. He proposes a cogent explanation by suggesting that living within the Catholic bubble shielded Catholic identity existing apart from public scrutiny and weakened its institutions ability to articulate the essence of faith and how it is lived out in Catholic
schools. Districts compounded the problem by creating Catholic “slogans” such as Core Values of dignity, respect, and loyalty. While it can be agreed these are noble attributes, they do not remain distinct and exclusive to Catholic values. Fundamentally, these are universal characteristics all people of good will strive to embody. Charlie states that the time of “waking up” is boldly on our doorstep.

*It has been my professional experience that indeed silence has prevailed on the Catholic educational landscape.* Relying on denominational and constitutional rights for the preservation of Catholic education does not bode well given our ever-changing 21st century society. While parents are choosing to enrol their children in Catholic schools, public pressure to achieve hoped for cost efficiencies by eliminating what some deem as a “duplicate” system challenges the status quo. Being able to support the formation of Catholic teachers remains a consideration throughout the span of their career and needs careful consideration of how Catholic identity is lived in the classroom. Simply said, defaulting to parent choice as being the sole validation of why a Catholic school is a redundant strategy. Without the explicit articulation of what this “choice” entails leaves one to conclude that Catholic schools are offering similar education to public schools.

*Our Catholic educational leaders need to clearly articulate their mandate,* to use words that show the distinctiveness provided by Catholic education and to verbalize this to their teachers, students, and community. The question of whether Catholic educational leaders are undermining Catholic education with their silence bears consideration. This has consequences when parents demand explicit examples of how Catholic education benefits their child. It is somewhat patronizing if on the one hand Catholic education prides itself on providing parental choice, while on the other hand is not able to articulate what the
choice affords. Regardless, if Catholic educational leaders are not able to clearly articulate how Catholic education benefits the common good of a democratic 21st century society, considering they are immersed in the culture on a daily basis, how can it be expected that the community at large will stand in support? This is not only a timely consideration given the discourse of Catholic education in Alberta; it is central to the validation and relevance of its very existence.

Catholic Education: Nurturing and Sustaining a Culture of Witness

Catholic educational leaders, according to Theresa, Barry, Charlie, and Thomas must live their life as a witness to the Catholic faith. Words are meaningless if action is contradictory or absent. Participants noted this to be the most influential leadership characteristic when leading a 21st century Catholic school. Lay Catholics, especially educators in schools, provide a unique opportunity for the Church reaching young people in a scalable way. Bibby and Reid (2016) explain how Catholic schools have a tremendous advantage by stating, “Catholic parents have enrolled their children in Catholic schools. As a result, the Catholic Church, through children and teens attending Catholic schools, has links to millions of families across the country” (p. 129). Participants illustrate Bibby and Reid’s observation and further state that because of this potential outreach, Catholic schools have the opportunity to nurture and support a child’s faith formation beginning at the age of five through to seventeen. These formative years provide a foundation for the formation of Catholic identity. Based on this understanding, the resonating priority for the participants in this study rests on the commitment of providing opportunities for faith formation and the willingness to work with teachers who
are on differing journeys. Thomas explains how in his schools he builds a culture of faith by working with a diverse staff:

I never wanted a staff of all high flyers. I wanted a good mix because the high flyers bring their own needs. They are always questioning things. They’re saying…why do we do it this way? I have a better way. Whereas, if you have a good mix, you get a mix of responses and a good mix of ideas. I often had teachers come up to me after a meeting and say, ‘I know we had a good discussion at the staff meeting. I don’t agree with the decision but thank you for allowing me to speak and bring out my viewpoint.’

Thomas’ understanding reflects a culture of trust where a diversity of opinions may be voiced. His reference to “high flyers” suggests that teachers have varying degrees of experience and expertise. He understands his responsibility as always being transparent with his teachers and respectful of their perspectives, especially in times of disagreement. This, Thomas explains creates a culture of trust which he understands as being an attribute all Catholic leaders should strive to achieve. A Catholic culture is the lifeblood of Catholic identity. Within an authentic Catholic community, all members are shepherded in their faith formation journey. Not only do Catholic educational leaders illuminate the path of faith for themselves, they do so for those who journey alongside. Thomas, with his comment, illustrates how the diversity of staff contributes to a variety of expertise, opinion, and creativity. It becomes the responsibility of the Catholic leader to provide, as Thomas explains, “safe places where open and honest dialogue about faith can cultivate growth.” Catholic educational leaders who outwardly and intentionally
demonstrate vulnerability, ingenuousness, and openness cultivate a culture where growth in faith formation is a communal journey. Thomas explains:

As Catholic leaders, especially with our young teachers, we have to keep offering opportunities, keep inviting them in, and keep giving them the support to grow into their faith. We can’t just say you’re on your own. We have to shepherd them and bring them along. It is the responsibility of the more seasoned people on staff to work with our younger teachers just like others did with us. As a Catholic leader you have to move around on that road to meet people where they’re at. You can’t always stay in one place or keep going ahead and leaving people behind.

Theresa describes encountering Catholic leaders during her time in leadership development who were very good at quoting scripture or preaching Gospel values; however they fell short when they did not live by the values they could eloquently articulate:

I noticed a real difference with some of my leaders when I was doing Catholic leadership formation. Some leaders can spell out the words and would know the right answers but then you would see in day to day actions that that’s not what being a Catholic leader is all about because you have to live it in your daily actions. I had an assistant principal who could recite the Gospel. I could never do that. Then I would notice her relationships with her students and her relationships with the parents that to me weren’t Catholic at all. Some people are disjointed they say one thing and do another. If you aren’t living it how can you articulate it?

Thomas concurs by sharing:
Catholic leaders need always have at the forefront how they treat people through their actions more than their words. I mean I can read the Ten Commandments and teach them. But if you see the forgiving, the caring, the accepting, the loving, then others will say, ‘Here are the Commandments in action.’ If we focus on words and rules but not on broader concepts then that is what drive our actions. Otherwise we can get bogged down with the minutia of what does this mean or what does that mean and when you start to do that then it becomes your opinion and your interpretation versus somebody’s else’s opinion and interpretation.

Thomas illustrates, with the example of teacher assigned supervision, how leaders may sometimes be perceived as favouring one teacher over another:

Sometimes teachers think you are unfair in terms of how you treat their own colleagues. For example, how much supervision somebody has. They have to trust that I’m doing it for the right reasons. Trust me that I am doing it for the right reasons. Then there is context...that I don’t just willy-nilly draw a name out of a hat. I try to explain that if you were in the same situation, that I would treat you in the same way. I always took on as much as I give other people, or more. These are actions that speak to our faith. You can preach this Commandment all day, but it comes down to doing it.

Thomas expounds on this understanding by underscoring professionalism as an important characteristic for all Catholic educational leaders referencing the Commandments in action as a way of substantiation one’s words with visible action.

According to all the participants in this study, Catholic educational leaders must be held to a high standard of professionalism rooted in the understanding that Catholic
leadership is a vocation and not simply a job. Charlie illustrates this with an example of conflict resolution with a colleague:

Tamara [pseudonym] could not make eye contact with me. I thought, oh man, I think we need some help here. I don’t know what to do. I’m not sure why things fell apart here, but I’m not comfortable with how they’re going. She told me she had called James [pseudonym] and he was coming to straighten me out. After a bit of mediation with James, Tamara and I came to realize our misunderstanding was taking away from both of us. In the parking lot later that day Tamara said to me, ‘I guess my anger has caused us a lot of problems.’ And I said, ‘Not to worry. We’ve just resolved it. Let’s get back on the path that we were. Let’s just move on from this.’ I struggled with people sometimes. But I always challenged myself to heal broken relationships not because it was the professional thing to do but because I saw it as a higher calling from God. I wanted to model that professionalism is one thing but vocation requires us to reach further and deeper.

Theresa expressed this differentiation as important to note and strove to articulate it in the faith formation of aspiring Catholic educational leaders. Within the role of leadership, including Catholic leadership, there is a temptation of enacting power through imposing authority over others, inadvertently cultivating a culture of control and micro-management. This sense of dominance from a “top down” style of leadership, Theresa shared, does not contribute to a culture of empowerment, ownership, or unity:

When I was working with leadership development of principals, I could certainly see the ones that knew it all. Some would come right out and say, ‘I’m the principal and we do it this way.’ I had a good sense of principals and how they ran
their school. Sometimes the priority wasn’t about the kids, it was about their own egos and career aspirations.

Theresa shared that when career opportunities arise, some Catholic educational leaders then turned to quoting scripture and providing exemplars of faith that had permeated all aspects of their role. Theresa described this as being “conveniently Catholic” when it suited their purpose of professional gain. It had nothing to do with being a witness to the faith but a rather a “witness to promotion.”

Thomas brings forward an important point regarding witness. He shared how the diversity of experience he gained by working at multiple schools helped inform, shape, and influence his identity as a Catholic educational leader. Additionally, he noted, that being part of the community held him accountable to the community.

I have been fortunate to be at two schools in my own community. I was in the church. I was in the stores. I mean my whole block, I would say 60, 70 percent were kids going to the I school I was in. I found it really positive. But I think that’s when your actions are noticed, and sometimes, it’s asking yourself okay, this is what I’m saying, this is what I should be saying as a faith leader and then ask yourself the question, do I really believe in what I’m saying, and are my words, do I really believe these words or am I just saying them. Then the next question is “am I actually living those words?”. I believe in lived action. I’m not just all the talk.

Will there be a point in Catholic education when witness to the Catholic faith becomes obsolete? In a society where individualism becomes more and more acceptable,
will there be a time where people who identify as Catholic simply pay lip service to their faith? Barry explores this possibility:

I wonder at what point what we’re trying to do in Catholic education no longer viable because we don’t have a critical number of authentic witnesses. Is there a point where we’re faking it? Father Mulligan (a Catholic priest from Ontario with 40 years experience in Catholic education) writes and speaks extensively on the topic of Catholic schooling in Canada. He earned his doctorate in Ministry and, for his work in Catholic education, has been the recipient of the highest papal honour a diocesan bishop can confer on behalf of the Pope. Mulligan said that the heart of Catholic education is the heart of the Catholic educator. If principals aren’t living their faith, schoolteachers aren’t living their faith, essentially, then why are we in this? If witness isn’t passing on the faith, then why are we in this? Catholic witness isn’t just something that exists at a conceptual level; Catholic witness has flesh and bones on it. It’s people.

As participants in this study pondered, explored, and responded to the research question, “What is the lived experience of Catholic educational leaders in relation to shaping, informing, and influencing Catholic identity in 21st century school?” knowing the Catholic story and living the Catholic story in the daily routine of life and work not only illuminates the understanding of one’s own faith journey, but also of those journeying alongside. As Thomas stated:

Jesus gave us many examples through the Parables. These stories showed the actions of Jesus. Anytime he walked down the street, anybody that he came upon that needed help he didn’t ask questions, he just helped. Even when people
expected him do this or that, he did what he had to do. Jesus did what he had to do, and it was his actions and his consistency and how he worked with everyone that stood out. Story gets to the heart of it all. This research gives us the opportunity to talk about our lived experience. We’re sharing our work and we’re sharing stories, examples and ideas of how we did it. It talks about what we have done but also how we have done it. This has been my path. It is authentic. It’s not a canned answer.

I have never felt more challenged than during my eleven years as a Catholic educational leader. As a teacher, I could close my classroom door and teach. Outside distractions were at my discretion to let enter or to keep out. My first year as principal, I quickly realized that closing my office door was often an act in futility. Having an open door policy set the unspoken gold standard of principalship. No longer could my role be contained within the walls of my office, rather the office often resembled a busy freeway of traffic bustling about, people weaving in and out, creating the ebb and flow of organized chaos and confusion. Some days I handled this well, others not so well. While it was easy to remember my role as Catholic leader on good days and welcome the open door, it was likewise easy to wish the door forever shut.

I often wondered if my colleagues felt the same way. With such a diversity of staff, students, and community, Catholic leadership has been challenging. Like Thomas, Theresa, Barry, and Charlie, being a living witness of the Catholic faith, struggling and growing, believing that my words were substantiated with witness in behaviour and decisions, weighed heavily. It was not in the managerial decisions of budgeting or maintenance where I was challenged, but rather in the human relationship of working
with staff. I recall one particular teacher taking a child into a storage room and yelling at them. I happened to be walking down the hallway and hearing this, absolutely stunned with disbelief. For one brief second I paused, wondering if I should enter the storage room, or walk by, no one would know. Choosing to enter the storage room, I recall my anxiety bubbling to the surface, waiting for the wrath of the teacher to engulf me. Better me than the child. As predicted, the red-faced teacher, glared at me demanding to know what I was going to do about this child, an intimidating challenge, I suspected. Trying to control my own emotions, I suggested to the teacher that it might be best for her to go home for the day, leaving the class and the child to my care. Taking the child by the hand, we both walked to the classroom, leaving the teacher in the storage room. I was not going to engage in any heat of the moment discussion with the teacher, knowing from past experience that my words would be meaningless. Best to leave with words unspoken; this child not needing to witness any further “love like Jesus” for the day.

Recalling that experience from my days as assistant principal, I often questioned why I ever contemplated the role of Catholic leadership. During the course of my doctoral studies, this passage has resonated with me time and time again, articulating what has been difficult to convey with words. Buijs (2005) differentiates ‘profession’ from a Catholic understanding of vocation by explaining, “A vocation is an inner call that arises from one’s own faith experience. It is experienced as an invitation from God, an exhortation from the person of Christ that expects a response coming from beyond oneself, so its task and purpose extends beyond oneself as well” (p. 335-336). I suppose listening to my inner voice has pleased both God and me.
My colleagues have often sought my advice both professionally and personally, believing that I had great insight and intuition in being able to “read” people. Like Thomas, I can detect a canned answer or a rehearsed response from prospective employees. My expectation is simple and direct. I ask for concrete examples of how faith has informed and influenced their decisions. Knowing the rationale to how people arrive at decisions has been most intriguing to me, as I recall having experienced conflict-saturated situations more often than I care to admit. I often turn to prayer. My impulse has been to wait, defaulting to reflection rather than reaction.

More often than not I believe it had to do with just asking the right questions. I have completed many teacher evaluations in my time as principal. In one particular situation, a young teacher was displeased with how one comment in the evaluation could be perceived as derogatory. I remained open to listening to her concerns and asked how she would reword it so that the intent of the message could be maintained. After numerous editing attempts, we both came to agreement. Regardless, I asked that we both sleep on it and revisit it in the morning, and at that point, both of us could sign the evaluation document. The next morning the teacher came to my office in what appeared to me a sombre mood. She explained to me how grateful she was that I had given her the opportunity for input into her final evaluation. No one had ever included her in the process, even though the process should be all inclusive of the teacher according to professional procedural standards. In particular she noted that when we talk about being Catholic it is often vague, but in this situation, she was able to grasp the commandment, “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Quietly, she stated that I had
shown her that Commandment in action. My response, “through your actions, pass it on.”

Catholic Educational Leadership: Informed by Mission and Vision

Catholic educational leadership, the third participant theme, is informed, shaped, and influenced by Catholic identity, and in turn, Catholic identity reciprocates by permeating Catholic educational leadership. This interdependence, as illustrated by participants in this study, sits within three domains: Mission and vision, faith formation, and ministry and vocation.

Visitors to a Catholic school will often notice intentionally adorned front entrances with many symbols of the faith such as pictures of the Pope, Archbishop, Saints, Mary, and Jesus. Often, there are beautiful prayer tables decorated to represent the different liturgical seasons, both in the main entrance of the school and also in each classroom. Theresa shares her perspective with regards to these outward signs of Catholic identity:

I always had visitors who would comment that there is a different “feel” in a Catholic school. I would ask them what it was but they were never able to pinpoint it exactly. I really tried to get a specific answer but never could. Understandably, Theresa explains, doubt might enter one’s mind about what this really means. A “feeling” is elusive and could easily be attributed to simply one’s own disposition and own personal interpretation. Certainly nothing that can be substantiated with any concrete examples. Participants agreed that, time and time again, the response remains the same; Catholic schools “feel” different.
It is understood by my participants that the “feel” is embedded in the mission and vision of Catholic schools. Physical manifestations and visible signs of the faith aid to communicate what a school values. Cook (2015) explains how “symbols are identity markers and cultural touchstones. They are physical manifestations and visible signs that represent and communicate what a school values. Symbols are subliminal transmitters of culture…. people develop a sentimental attachment to them and therefore they tend to evoke an emotional response” (p. 17). It was agreed amongst all participants that symbols are subliminal transmitters of culture, silently expressing vignettes of what characterizes Catholic faith. Theresa explains that these symbolic representations of faith directly contribute to a common vision and mission binding Catholic educators:

It is something that tied us all together in our Catholic district. It is our common belief in God. This common belief allows us to talk to students about Christmas and Lent. As soon as you go into a Catholic school, you see all the symbols. All of these things tie us together…bind us together…our common beliefs bring us together.

Charlie expounds by stating:

We base everything on our master teacher, Jesus Christ. We mention Jesus Christ in all of our schools to permeate faith in all that we do. We are building God’s kingdom here on earth. I am wondering why we never put that in our mission statements. We talk about serving God and serving others. That’s one way of building God’s kingdom here on earth. That is definitely not something you would hear or see in public schools.
Upon entering a Catholic school, the symbols of the faith are ready to greet all those who enter, and this is important; however, Barry conveys that Catholic leadership evokes a desire to analyze deeply the nurturing of culture and how it is manifested in a Catholic school. External pressures sometimes get in the way, such as the notion of getting with the times, with common sense proposing that not everything current is cool, and not everything old is obsolete. Thus the symbols of the faith assist as landmarks in expressing the mission of Catholic education where Christ is the reason. Theresa explains how creating a Catholic culture of hospitality was very important in her leadership journey:

A Catholic culture is welcoming to all who enter. For me it is a place of hospitality, goodwill, and mutual respect. Sometimes the staff wanted me to lock the front doors until five minutes before the bell. They wanted to keep people out of the staffroom. I had to explain to them that we were a welcoming community and that we could not be locking the doors. What does that show? At one school staff set up a coffee pot right by the front door so that the parents would have coffee there and not stray anywhere near the staffroom or the interior of the school. What kind of feel is there when you can’t enter the school until precisely the right moment in accordance to a bell?

Catholic schools are schools that welcome all students. We are reminded that the word Catholic comes from the Greek word *Katholos*, meaning the whole, where all are welcome. However, Theresa’s comments suggest a tension of unwelcome. Certainly, keeping parents segregated to one section of the school and locking the doors does not
depict hospitality and friendliness. It certainly resonates antithetically to Catholic virtues.

Thomas, as a Catholic school leader, shares his need to welcome all students:

My place is not to judge, but to continually spread the word. Spread the news. I am accepting and working with whoever comes in that door. ... I say come on in. How can I help you? How can I support you? As Catholic schools we care, we have compassion, we love, respect, welcome. When I go to bed at night I say God, they’re yours now. I’m going to sleep.

Rymarz (2016) postulates that a Catholic worldview “involves an approach to life based on some type of shared social vision and beliefs. It also leads to certain activities and attitudes” (p. 64). Thus, a common understanding of the mission and vision for Catholic education, according to the participants in this study, remains central to the role of Catholic educational leadership. Although words are important in expressing what is valued, living the ideals in common everyday experiences remains the professional standard of integrity. As expressed repeatedly by Thomas, “saying the words isn’t enough. We have to live it. We have to show in our actions what we are all about.”

Charlie explores further the importance of mission and vision being clearly communicated in Catholic schools and how that needs to be linked to his understanding of the Catholic story. He explains:

Catholic education is based on our past and our tradition. We continue to do what we do. Our traditions of the church make Catholicism different. We are a sacramental-based religion. This resonates with people. If we think of the traditions, it is even about the Catechism relating to what it is we’re teaching.
Everything is passed on, hence our traditions. We have a solid knowledge base that people act upon.

Barry provides an illustrative example:

There is an image that comes to mind. There is a difference between living in a home or in a hotel. Within a home, you know the history of your family, you know the history of your ancestors, you know the history of your kids, you are in close intimate relationships with their stories. You journey alongside them through life. In a hotel, you’re under the same building. You’re under the same Catholic church but you don’t know the person next door. You don’t know Augustine, you don’t know Aquinas, you don’t know what they’re about. So, yes, we’re all Catholics and we’re living in the Hyatt Regency but do we know the person next to us? Do we know the history of this building, this structure, this edifice like we know with the same degree of intimacy our own house? We know when the windows were changed. We know when the cement was poured. We know when the furnace broke down and we all froze that night. It’s almost like our church is our home. Do we know our Catholic churches as intimately as we know the stories of our own home?

It is the responsibility of Catholic educational leaders not only to facilitate staff in articulating mission and vision statements from a Catholic perspective; it is also their responsibility to ensure these statements are the lifeblood of the school. Thomas explains:

As I work with new principals that whole notion of vision and where you stand as a Catholic leader has to be out there for everyone to see. When you’re having
conversations whether they be the easy ones or the difficult ones you can always tie back to your vision of how it serves the community as a whole.

Catholic educational leaders are at the forefront of ensuring that the mission and vision of a Catholic school is lived and actualized to create a distinct culture. Barry explains:

Leadership is compelled by a sense of purpose. We can draw from Jesus that the mission needs to always be at the forefront. People need to understand the mission, and the mission will draw people towards it. One’s leadership has to be very mission-oriented. We are losing a sense of who we are. Pope Francis talked about Catholics suffering from a collective amnesia. That frightens me. If we know who we are, that there’s becoming a disassociation from our past, and sometimes we want to redefine ourselves in ways and still call ourselves Catholic. Does it really correspond to what Catholics are called to be? Yet we want to hang on to this remnant, the term Catholic.

Thus, the importance for Catholic educational leaders to understand the Catholic story and recount it to others is important when expressing and enacting a school mission and vision statement. It is through the telling and retelling where new understanding and insights are formed. If one does not know the Catholic story, even at a rudimentary level, how can it be formational to one’s Catholic identity? How can it be articulated in a school’s mission and vision? As such, Barry explains the importance of seeing himself in the Catholic story – not being fractured from it:

I know our story. I know the Catholic story. I know our tradition. I know our roots. I know that we’re the church of Augustine and of Aquinas and of St. Paul
and of Mother Teresa. So I don’t feel as much pressure because I know the story. I see myself in the story and I’m comfortable in the story. But for Catholic educational leaders who don’t know our story, there’s nothing rooting them in it. So, they become vulnerable to going with the current latest trends. Like you said, it’s like the wind taking them away because the roots haven’t been developed. There’s no story to anchor them. The roots haven’t been developed so all the more important; it becomes to do Catholic formation of leaders because otherwise they’re strangers to themselves. Then you become vulnerable to being victim to whatever the latest whim is, even if the whim isn’t consistent with the age-old story of the Church. The church isn’t stuck, the Church evolves and the church grows too. I mean there is Vatican One. There is Vatican Two. You can look under the papacy of Pope Francis and see that the church is changing. Catholic education needs to grow with the Church - not be fractured from it.

Popular criticism of the Church posits the narrative that it is out-dated and not “with the times.” Catholic educational leaders must indeed come to terms with how their own Catholic understanding permeates the culture of the school. Barry’s comment suggests that Catholic identity remains permeable and dynamic and aligns with Dulles’ Models of the Church that outlines multiple ecclesial identities. Feelings of feeling fractured from either the Church or the school, may arise when Catholic educational leaders pay lip service to mission and vision statements, however find it difficult to live outwardly in word, deed, and action. It becomes increasingly problematic when the culture of the school becomes oppositional to Church teachings; oppositional, in the sense that it does not engage in respectful dialogue regarding sexuality, abortion, contraception, teenage
pregnancy, and other social issues. Not only does it stifle the faith formation of students and staff, it becomes counter-productive in serving the mission of the church. Barry explains:

When we talk about Catholicism and having to get with the times, the reality is, no, there are pieces of Catholicism that are timeless. In maintaining that timelessness, we stand as a witness to a countercultural message. Culture isn’t always right. More often than not, it’s wrong.

Misunderstanding with Catholic mission and vision, according to the participants in this study, has been on the Alberta political landscape. Examples include forgetting that Catholic schools are centered on a relationship with Christ, or that Catholic leaders should enter into respectful debate with their community in the spirit of protecting the well being of students. It is in witnessing such poor examples of Catholic leadership, participants agree, that a growing number of political leaders in Alberta are able to relentlessly seek cracks solidifying their argument for one publicly funded school system. This has been the situation in Alberta. From within, specifically a few Catholic Trustees, the mission and vision of Catholic education has been, according to the participants in this study, grossly misunderstood and misrepresented. As stated by Theresa this is very damaging to Catholic education:

Just like our Catholic Board of Trustees. We read about them in the media and you can see that some of them cannot articulate what Catholic education is all about and yet they’re supposed to be our spokespeople. They are the ones going to the media and can’t articulate why we need both a Public and Catholic Board and they do a lot of damage. So it has to start from the top. One statement from a
Catholic trustee that doesn’t support the mission and vision of our schools can probably wipe out the work principals have been doing in their schools for years. Politicians are always looking for things that are controversial to make a claim to fame.

Thomas concurs by explaining:

Do you really need three articles in the paper coming from Catholic trustees? Why do we keep hanging ourselves? In some respects, Catholic schools were a leader in inclusivity. We were talking and practicing inclusion long before the politicians caught wind of it. Now there is a narrative that is being spun out of control. This is not what we are about.

Barry clearly establishes his loyalty:

Jesus was always loyal to the Father. As a leader I have to ask myself what am I loyal to? An important point is that Jesus also deflected glory back to the Father. Which is what we are to do as leaders. It is not about us. It’s about our Catholic mission. So all glory be to God for what we’re doing. All things for the greater glory of God – Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam. It’s my life motto. It’s the idea. It’s not for my glory it is for God’s glory. I think a more beautiful image is of marriage where two people standing side-by-side looking towards the same Father. As a married couple if we’re just looking at each other, we’re forgetting Him. He is the center of our marriage. Marriage involves three. Leadership needs to be the same way. We’re a team, but we’re looking towards the same end zone. We’re looking towards the same cross.
Barry acknowledges that although the church moves slowly, but there is good reason. This comment shifting from his earlier stance as the Church being counter-cultural to being current, cutting edge, and timeless:

The church does move slowly. You can’t have an organization that looks after a billion people and expect it to be cutting edge. The reality is it does take some time to catch up. But that’s one of the reasons we love the church is because we’re not reactive. We’re not always worried about what’s the new flavour of the month. There is a bit of timelessness to us and we are thoughtful and we are reflective. Sometimes we take our time but good things take time. That is actually one of the strengths of our Church is that we’re not quite ready to adapt at a moment’s notice to the times.

I am a daughter to Italian immigrants. My mother and father, both post World War II children, understood full well mission and vision. Having lived a life as tenant farmers in southern Italy, they understood intuitively what it meant to have a purpose. Deciding to immigrate to Edmonton, a city they could not even locate on a map, demonstrated courage, deeply rooted in trusting God’s will. My parents wore their faith on their sleeve. Both my parents wore necklaces bearing crosses. My mother carried with her praying cards with pictures of saints. As a child, I recall her pulling these out of her purse at a second’s notice and handing them to me to read in case I would dare be bored. Upon entering my parents’ home you would know immediately identify this was a Catholic home with pictures of the saints, Mary, Jesus adorning all walls.

Thinking back to my childhood there were general themes that were reiterated in my family’s mission and vision statement: Family, Loyalty, Respect, and God. If written,
the mission statement read something like this: Respect your family, and be loyal to God. There were times I thought my parents had it all wrong. Shouldn’t you be respectful to God and loyal to your family? I thought this question a multitude of times but dared never ask. Regardless, I now realize that this litany of loyalty was forming my Catholic identity as a child, adult, educator, and leader.

Charlie, Thomas, Theresa, and Barry all clearly articulated that loyalty to the mission and vision of Catholic education is central to their leadership. Understanding the Catholic story as one’s own story is important for being able to live the authentic Catholic message, which they agreed needs to be in alignment and unity to the Catholic church. The challenge is presented when Catholic educational leaders do not fully embrace all aspects of Catholic teachings. Does this make them less of a Catholic...less of a leader? Or does it simply mean that they are forming their Catholic identity around their own understanding based on personal and professional experiences. Certainly educating oneself in the Catholic faith, knowing the Catholic story, serves to inform, shape, and ultimately influence one’s Catholic identity as a leader. In fact, the Catholic mission and vision can serve, as Barry suggested, as an anchor where everyone can make the Catholic story uniquely their own.

I have had the opportunity, as a teacher, to work with Catholic educational leaders that either inspired or hindered my Catholic identity. In other words, the culture of the Catholic school, as established by the leader, either deliberately or not, greatly influenced how I would or would not enact my Catholic identity. I learned to adjust to ignoring, silencing, verbalizing, or modelling, in accordance to the expectation of the Catholic leader. It was only after many years of experience, and in relationship with
others, that I had the courage to articulate my Catholic identity explicitly. Even in the midst of writing this dissertation, I find myself trying to weave together a coherent and articulate expression of my Catholic identity. Mentors such as Fr. Jim and Sr. Annata along with colleagues, friends, students, parents, and my own family, gave me voice to what was a weak and complacent stance. As such, Catholic educational leaders should heed caution when imposing their own understanding and ideals of mission and vision, as understood through the Catholic story, within a hierarchical and authoritarian manner. Such an approach could very well suffocate the expression of Catholic identity at a time when articulation is needed most.

**Catholic Educational Leadership: Shaped by Faith Formation**

All participants were in accord that educational leadership, and in particular Catholic educational leadership, is a complex role. Over time the expectations, roles, and responsibilities continue to mount on a daily basis. There is an endless and varying litany of expectations from the government, district, and community. Considering a range of leadership style, one must aspire to be an agile leader able to adapt to current societal and educational conditions, implement change more quickly than ever before, make evidence-based decisions that all stakeholders commend, and respond to many diverse situations in record time. Due to the vastness of the responsibilities that Catholic educational leaders must endeavor to fulfill, being able to demarcate what Catholic educational leadership entails is daunting, teetering on impossible. Being able to meet the expectations, in today’s complex world, leaves little time for intentional faith formation. Theresa explains:

> There are so many researchers out there who are giving you definitions of leadership and the more you read the more confused you become and the more
overwhelmed you become because people are saying such different things. When you talk about Catholic leadership it just makes everything so much more challenging and so much more difficult to really pin down.

Theresa views Catholic leadership as being indefinable and difficult to articulate. It is problematic nurturing faith formation within a school community, given the diversity of individuals, when one’s own sense of Catholic identity remains intangible and difficult to express. This does not posit well, according to Theresa, for Catholic educational leaders who are trying to express how Catholic leadership differs from secular leadership. What did resonate strongly is that participants affirmed that Catholic educational leaders must remain committed to nurturing the faith formation of their teachers, students, and school community. It must be a priority and remain at the forefront of a Catholic leader’s responsibility. Thomas explains his strategy of using Pope Francis as inspiration:

I am using a book this year with our newer principals, a group I am leading. The book is called Leadership Lessons from Pope Francis. I love Pope Francis. He knows how to shepherd. He knows where it’s at and what we should be doing as Catholics. He lives what he preaches. Our young Catholic leaders need to understand that we do what we need to do. We don’t pull out the Bible and start saying…this is the way it should be done…here’s the rulebook. Rather it is taking care of the person and when the time is right we’ll talk about the faith. Our young Catholic leaders need to know that.

Preaching from the pulpit has never been Thomas’ leadership style. He suggests that leaders can best influence faith formation by showing genuine care and understanding that everyone is on their own unique path of faith. A prescriptive approach
does not respect a person’s distinctive Catholic identity and suggests faith development can be reduced to a cookie cutter model. Thomas explains how it is important for him as a Catholic educational leader to walk the faith journey alongside his staff:

I think as a Catholic leader we have to continue to bring everybody along on that faith road. We talked about that road where everybody’s at and meet them where they’re at and continue to walk with them towards the face of Jesus and closer to God. We have to look for those opportunities and moments where that gorilla [reference to gorilla in the room experiment] is there and you notice God and make note of that.

Walking alongside others on their faith journey leaves much discretionary freedom in terms of what it entails. It is difficult to articulate what a “faith journey” constitutes or even what landmarks one would encounter. With this in mind, Barry explains how he deliberately seeks opportunities to discuss faith with his staff in a deliberate and concrete manner. By doing this he places importance on leadership matters beyond simply the operational and managerial. If, as a Catholic educational leader, faith does not enter into conversation, Barry suggests that it is not deemed important:

One of the challenges for Catholic educational leaders is faith formation of staff. Perhaps the staff doesn’t attend mass, or the staff doesn’t have a prayer life, or the staff aren’t in touch with their own faith life. This is the cynic in me coming out now. I am really big on faith formation of the adults because we’re the custodians of Catholic identity. So, as a leader I try to do everything I can to ensure that there’s an abundance of faith formation opportunities for our staff. We have a faith formation component at our administrative meetings. I’ll sometimes run
those faith formation components. When I’m talking to principals I’m not just
talking to them about their PAT (Provincial Achievement Test) results and their
latest IMR (Infrastructure Maintenance and Renewal) project. I’m asking about
the faith life in the school because what you talk about sends a message about
what you find important. So, I try to do what I can as a leader to try to keep the
faith front and center in terms of everything that we do. I have a vested interest in
Catholic education both personally and professionally.

Theresa discusses the mentoring of young teachers explicitly with regard to the
permeation of the Catholic faith in their daily lessons, helping them recognize that they
are not simply a Math teacher but rather a Catholic Math teacher. It is important, as
expressed by Theresa, that beginning teachers consider such questions: How is teaching
Math curriculum at a public school different than teaching Math at a public school? If a
parent were to observe a Math class in a public school versus a Math class in the Catholic
school, would it or should it be starkly different? Participants reiterated numerous times
that this distinction in curriculum should envelop every class and contribute to the
Catholic ethos of the school.

Thomas summarizes the further complication of curricular permeation based on
teacher experience and preparedness:

There are different levels of formation amongst our teachers even if they identify
as Catholic. It is a journey and I see it even in my own kids. It is more than just
going to church. It’s more than just talking. It’s everything. It’s a journey we have
to continue to realize is not easy. We can’t expect to hire a brand new teacher and
expect them to be where you and I are at right now. Just like kids go through
physical growth so is our spiritual growth. It’s gradual. It’s a journey and you continue to water and nurture it and till that soil so the seeds can grow. Those roots are formed and they branch out and continue to grow and strengthen underground. Your faith is a part of your identity.

He suggests that Catholic identity is not solely developed by degree, strengthening by a numerical chronology of time, as this would suggest a formulaic approach, but rather that Catholic identity is heavily influenced by one’s life experiences. Thomas differentiates faith formation from faith professional development, suggesting that the faith formation model characteristic of most school districts might not adequately meet the unique needs of teachers. Granted that both domains are important, Thomas emphasises that they cannot be considered as one entity. Participant findings clearly articulated the importance of mentorship not only in faith formation but also equally to curriculum permeation. Presently, delivering curriculum imbued with Catholic faith proves a lofty task for the most experienced of teachers. Expecting new Catholic teachers to meet such standards might very well be the tipping point for unreasonable expectations.

Theresa explains her understanding of formation as Catholic educational leaders building ‘church’ within the school:

Leaders sometimes don’t realize the duty and responsibilities they hold as a Catholic leader in a school because they are so busy with a lot of roles. Sometimes we forget that we are primarily responsible for the faith formation of our staff and students and even our community. We are building a Catholic culture in our school…church in our school.
According to the participants in this study, Catholic educational leaders must recognize that they cannot lead faith formation alone. Curriculum consultants, veteran teachers, school chaplains, and Catholic educational leaders need to be actively involved. In the ideal Catholic school, a layered faith formation model could exist whereby all stakeholders partner to cultivate an authentic Catholic curriculum that permeates all aspects of school life. Participants agreed that as Catholic educational leaders careful consideration must be given to faith formation and how the Catholic culture of the school is permeated in faith in all domains including academic and social.

_I am constantly challenged with the faith formation of staff. In fact, I deem it to be the most disconcerting aspect of being a Catholic educational leader. There are times when I must admit I did not feel it to be my responsibility to mentor others in their faith formation. I rationalized this being one’s personal and professional obligation when making the deliberate choice of working in a Catholic school. I confess to being absolutely frustrated when I saw teachers mumbling prayers, or worse yet, not even participating. Even worse, I have seen prayer tables in classroom considered the second trashcan of the classroom where a “dump it here” sign would have explicated the message. The sickening feeling in my stomach would thicken as I debated how best to approach the issue with the transgressor. Many times, especially in my younger years, I chose to ignore and hope for the best. Strategies were not readily available and luckily deadlines for budget review and staffing timelines provided both distraction and justification for my ineptness at managing such sensitive issues._

_over the years, I have taken a much more deliberate approach to faith formation. Certainly, the Pope’s leadership has influenced my understanding and has provided_
concrete examples of servant leadership. I believe that the Pope’s teachings on leadership could very well inform the faith formation of Catholic leaders and serve as a hallmark of practice. Krames (2015) shares how he has looked to Pope Francis for insight:

I am not a member of the Catholic Church. I am not even Catholic. I am the son of Holocaust survivor...having studied the vast majority of the great CEO’s of the late twentieth century...what is it about this leader that has drawn the attention of so many? Perhaps it is the humility he displays both in how he lives his life and how he leads his flock. (pp. xvii-1)

This book resonated with and supported my ecclesial understanding of Church as Mystical Communion whereby community is unified through the presence of the Holy Spirit always respectful of the diversity and evolving Catholic identity of its members. Krames shared his experiences of leadership from the perspective of an outsider inquiring into the leadership of Pope Francis admiring his coherence in living and leading. This coherence allows Pope Francis to lead by example in humility and not be motivated by arrogance or ego. One of the most powerful messages I am left with is his ability to gather people of diverse backgrounds and show them the beauty of the Catholic faith. His recent visits to prisoners, and sick children, to those marginalized and forgotten demonstrate these characteristics.

It has taken me many years of experience to fully appreciate the explanation expressed by Cook (2015) that, “A Catholic school is a school first, however, a Catholic school’s academic mission is not separate from its religious mission. What and how schools teach is what distinguishes them as Catholic” (p. 33). Failing to do this, Catholic education will be reduced to offering Religion as a separate and distinct class, easily
accommodated in any public school. Given that the curriculum for Religion classes is clearly outlined as any other subject area, it could be sequentially and theoretically taught as easily as Math, Science, or any other Program of Study. Further, a school would only need a few teachers specializing in Religious studies to teach faith as a distinct subject. Would this, however, suffice to consider a school Catholic or would it best be described as Catholicism being taught in a school?

It has been my experience as a Catholic educational leader that having students participate in Religion class simply does not suffice for creating a Catholic culture distinctly different from public schools. Isolating Catholic teachings solely to the assigned Religion class defeats any prospects of building a permeated Catholic school culture. In recent months, public discourse suggests that public schools can easily accommodate Catholic students by offering such a Religion option course in school. This raised heated debate from Catholic and public school supporters alike. The Alberta Catholic School Trustee Association responded by stating:

Alberta’s Catholic Schools have always been places where our Catholic faith plays a vital role in the learning development of our students. The Alberta Catholic School Trustees' Association (ACSTA) would like to offer the points below to clarify that Catholic schools in Alberta are not just another school system, or substitute offering, but rather are schools with a Catholic centered view which permeates the whole learning experience. Catholicism and Catholic education is not an alternative program offered in a secular school but a worldview, encompassing a Christian perspective, imbued with the Spirit, taught by faith witnesses who are more than teachers but sacraments to God’s grace, and
Catholicism is permeated throughout the curriculum, as well as school life in general, be it through sports or extracurricular activities. We believe Catholic religion courses belong in fully permeated Catholic schools.

(http://www.acsta.ab.ca/news/2017/2/7/choosing-catholic-education-in-alberta)

A possible consideration, Cook (2015) suggests, is “Hiring for mission cannot be overstated. In Catholic schools, hiring practices should determine job fit, as well as, culture and mission fit (p. 44).” The Catholic educational leader should then have insight and strategically staff their school so as to create a balance between experienced and inexperienced teachers, should know the gifts and strengths each teacher possesses and how these will contribute to cultivating a Catholic community. Cook (2015) suggests this can be done “through a written mission-centered job description or a teacher profile that reflects the schools’ specific charism and core values” (p. 45). This strategy would have served me well as a novice principal; however, due to my own inexperience as a Catholic educational leader, I would still fall short of addressing the complexity of Catholic schools and the ever-changing student demographics. Faith formation is an incredibly sensitive and multifaceted responsibility facing Catholic educational leadership. Defaulting to delegating this responsibility, which I have experienced and witnessed, will not serve Catholic education well and does not demonstrate authentic leadership.

Catholic Educational Leadership: Influenced by Ministry as Vocation

Is Catholic educational leadership a profession or a vocation? Probing even deeper, is the role considered a ministry? This question resonates pivotal importance within the context of this study, as it captures the Catholic educational leader’s understanding of Catholic identity and articulates the distinction of the role setting it apart
from other leadership frameworks. The participants in this study readily used the words *ministry* and *vocation* to describe their leadership role. Theresa explains how she understands ministry and vocation as foundational to Catholic educational leadership:

Ministry means, “to serve.” Jesus said that he “came not to be served but to serve.” (Mark 10:45) I believe that I have to model this while here on earth. In my leadership position, to minister in our Catholic schools meant that I had to encourage faith development and develop the Catholic culture in our building. It was also important to not only build community in the school but also cultivate relationships between the home, school and parish. As time went on, I also felt in my ministry it was becoming more and more important to preserve our Catholic identity.

As far as vocation, Theresa shares:

Vocation to me means that a person is born with a passion for a particular career. The passion, I believe comes from sharing your gifts that you have been given by God. As a leader in a Catholic school, you need to be trained in certain areas to obtain a certain skill set; however, no one can train you or teach you to have that passion. Vocation is like a calling from God – it can’t be taught.

Barry illuminates further by adding:

Christ wants us to live fully and that fullness is to find expression in our vocation as Catholic leaders…I think I am starting to see a lot of things through different eyes…we need to do a better job making our principals realize that they are doing Christ’s work and that this work is ministry. It’s not just being a principal in a school that is a Catholic school. It’s deeper than that. It’s carrying out the mission of the church…our work can be joined with the passion of Christ in offering for
the redemption of the world…I really identify with that -- that our work can be made holy. You bring your work to the altar of God. You build the future of the church based on the stones of the past.

Thomas begins by sharing the proactive approach he undertook in developing his leadership journey and developing his sense of ministry. He explains how he purposely put himself in a difficult situation so as to develop his repertoire of patience that he saw as a virtue. It was important for Thomas to serve at-risk and marginalized students first and foremost. These students often have severe emotional and behavioral issues with little home support. Many live in group homes and schools work with ever changing case managers trying to restore stability and safety. Teachers working with severely traumatized and troubled students require an incredible skill set. Unfortunately such positions are often delegated to inexperienced first year teachers thirsty for any type of assignment and naive to the skillset required to work with such troubled students. These experiences Thomas attributes to developing his understanding of ministry in service and vocation in calling. Thomas shares:

When I began thinking of an administration role, I realized I needed a change. So I applied for a job in a PDP [Positive Development Program]. The principal at the time said, ‘you’re applying for this job? Nobody else applies for these jobs.’ My learning from teaching that class was career changing. I said that every future administrator should spend time with a PDP class because after that nothing fazed me. I had eight students for the whole year and they taught me so much about forgiveness and about patience and about second chances, and just about supporting them where they were. It was a gong show that year for a while until I
figured out I’m here for the whole year and I’ve got to make this work. I had to change my whole approach and style and that was one of the big turning points. That really carried me through in terms of what ever happened in other schools, it was nothing. I spent a year in PDP. This is nothing.

Reflecting on his PDP experience, Thomas links this experience to his leadership in terms of working both with teachers and students, never shying away from difficult situations and always seeking to find a positive resolution to conflict. Thomas expresses how serving marginalized students and working with at risk teachers is an important responsibility especially with his understanding that Catholic leadership involves ministry and vocation. He explains:

As a Catholic educational leader, I look at the policy and regulations not necessarily word for word. Sometimes you need to consider the spirit of the law when making decisions. You need to look at things more generally. For example, as a school principal I hated to be tied down with black and white ways of dealing with kids, especially when it comes to discipline…I think of the staff as my kids. With my “at risk” staff my first response was never just get rid of them. It was what can we do to keep you part of our school but continue to move you forward and to grow. Believe me, I had Individual Program Plans for my staff too.

Pope Francis has been influential in Thomas’ faith formation, both privately and professionally deepening his understanding of ministry and vocation. Krames (2015) describes how “Pope Francis lives by a set of values that consistently places others before himself, viewing his leadership role as a servant” (p. xiv). A reoccurring theme for Thomas is how building positive relationships with others has been and continues to be
foundational to his being. Within these relationships, Thomas actively seeks opportunities to serve those less fortunate as part of developing his ministry. He explains:

We don’t have to follow and get hung up on the letter of the law. That’s not the way Jesus operated and that’s not how Pope Francis operates. I started thinking about Lent this year and I thought, how do I become involved in helping the poor and the marginalized in the Year of Mercy? So, one of the things I did is deliver food to the inner city. I started doing that on a weekly basis during Lent. Pope Francis has inspired me in a sense that I am now volunteering at our church to go to the Remand Centre and pray the Rosary to prisoners. We sit and chat for a while, and they come up and shake my hand and thank me. I always leave thinking I’ve done some good in their lives. They tell me about their history, their grandparents, when they prayed the rosary as a child. I come out of there feeling really good. So, it is something that started as a Lent project but now it’s become part of me. It’s helped me grow in a sense on that road closer to God.

Charlie highlights an important element in Catholic educational leadership that is promotion. How is this related to ministry and vocation? Charlie explains how receiving a phone call regarding a change in school placement from Leadership Services is often a nerve-wracking experience. Although principals articulate preferences in schools or programs, much is determined by the “needs of the District” which might not be in alignment with the career aspirations of the individual:

I am sitting in my wonderful recruitment job at HR and the Director of Leadership Services comes in and closes the door and says, “We’d like you to consider returning to St. Y School as principal in the Fall.” I said, “Well, I haven’t applied
to be principal.” The Director says to me, “Well, commitments can change.” I remember thinking this was a real message of confidence. So, I returned to St. Y School and it was a wonderful experience and credit to the principal before me. I reflected on how lucky I was to see St. Y School for a second time. My first time, it was an angry place. There were lots of kids that were struggling, and there were lots of suspensions. I had a routine that driving home, I’d try and discard everything in the river as I went over the freeway. Then in the morning I would pick it up on the way back to school. It was a way of helping me. Some days I got home, I didn’t have the patience for my own family and I knew that was wrong.

Understanding Catholic educational leadership as a vocation and not a job is foundational to serving Catholic education. Charlie was placed twice in St. Y, first time as Assistant Principal and then as Principal. This school, identified as a top three high-risk schools within a District of 90 schools, certainly requires strong leadership. Schools with such a designation serve communities with high percentage of poverty, large population of high-risk students often underachieving and facing difficult challenges both academically and socially. It is not uncommon that, as principals progress through their career, they desire esteemed positions in the big shiny new schools or in large High Schools. That is the culture of promotion, the tension between career goals vs. vocational service. Most principals would consider being placed at St. Y School for the second time as a demotion or, ironically enough, appropriate for a beginning principal. Charlie, having worked in Human Resources, explains his struggle with this perception:

There were those who were in it for more as a job than as a vocation. I wanted to help those people come to understand it as a vocation. Being at St. Y School was
such an eye opener for me. When I found out I was going there I said to my friend
“I’m not supposed to say anything, but you being my good friend, I’m going to
tell you. I’m going to St. Y School. And then I got the pause. I knew it was…St. Y
School? Like, really? You know, a lot of people had that attitude, well what did
you do wrong?”
As Charlie continued to discuss his perception of promotion, he stated:
   All kids deserve the best especially in the schools that have the marginalized, the
poor, the challenges. That’s where we need our best. The problem is that
sometimes the best don’t want to go there. That’s where we as Catholics live out
our Beatitudes. When I reflect on my days at St. Y School, I would always say to
the staff, ‘these kids deserve the best.’ I was proud to be serving there.
Participants unequivocally referenced Jesus as an exemplar of Catholic leadership.

It is in the stories of experience that Jesus himself shared, through the parables that
insight for Catholic leaders is found. Barry and I talk about how leadership can be very
challenging in terms of solving problem after problem after problem. Just as one fire
distinguishes a new flame ignites. It is overwhelming and during these trying times
patience runs thin. Participants confided that when leaders rush into action without due
thought and attention, they falter. Jesus demonstrates through the stories in the Gospel,
how he, when faced with complex issues such as his own impending crucifixion, retreated
to the Garden of Gethsemane to find solitude and prayer. Barry explains:
   Jesus would tell us that leadership, first and foremost, is the need to be with
people but away from people at the same time. I think so often, leaders, by
disposition or by default, tend to be people of action. They want to get things
done. We see that when we look at the life of Christ. Indeed, Christ was a person of reflection and action. He did get things done. He multiplied the loaves, he turned the water into wine, he gathered a crowd of followers, he preached for three years. He was a man of action. But Jesus, the leader, was also a man of great contemplation. There were many times Jesus would remove himself from the crowd. The Catholic school leader needs to be reflective, because if we’re not, we can lose ourselves in the action and forget the purpose for which we’re doing things. You can start to notice things, when you remove yourself from the action, you can start to notices things that you can’t when you’re in the weeds. Leaders need to be on the dance floor and on the balcony. You have an aerial view and you can see the entire context around. It becomes three-dimensional.

Barry shared example after example of difficult situations that required thoughtful decision-making that would serve the common good while respecting the integrity of the individuals involved. He noted that each person carries their own personal cross often not visible to others; he illuminates an understanding that is rarely shared -- Catholic educational leadership is sacrifice:

Catholic leadership involves suffering. Jesus’ leadership led him to the cross. Sometimes we forget that and we don’t want to carry that burden of responsibility. We want the cross we carry to be made of Styrofoam and we forget that the cross is made of wood. A cross is meant to be difficult to carry. There are graces to be found in carrying that burden, in suffering. So, yeah, anybody that thinks they can go in leadership and not endure suffering, you’re signing up for the wrong gig.
Building on the understanding that Christ is the reason for Catholic school, Thomas expounds that:

Jesus is in our leadership stories. I can say this is what Catholic educational leadership is all about. The examples are in the parables. This is what makes our leadership distinct. We have a Catholic worldview. It’s about making Catholic education better not just for me but also for everyone. We have to give witness to our faith and secular leaders would not have that responsibility. Witness is our credibility. We have to focus on how we are living our lives for others and with others. It’s about how we are working together to get to Heaven. Catholic leadership is in our actions. It is visible. It has to be seen.

Barry is able to articulate Catholic educational leadership in a manner that, he believes, fully sets it distinct from secular leadership:

Catholic educational leadership is in the service of human growth, human fulfillment and understood in the way of the Gospel. It’s in the service of trying to get kids into the Kingdom and building up the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth. We help our students realize that our end goal here is not purely a worldly one. There is an eternal end we need to keep in mind.

Deciding whether to pursue a leadership role in Catholic education proved to be a challenging experience for each participant. Speaking from my experience, I blindly stumbled into the role. Heeding the advice of others, I thought myself quite masterful at the managerial and organizational dimensions. It appeared to me from an outsider to the role that indeed being an educational leader was quite systematic and orderly. In fact, being able to organize events, schedule teaching assignments, administer provincial
exams, manage student conduct, and keep a balanced budget topped the list of priorities and defining the competency of a Principal from a managerial perspective. However, within this managerial tasks can certainly be performed from a stance of ministry and vocation. This can be achieved when the Catholic educational leader adopts a contemplative practice of leadership, as suggested by Schutloffel (2013) that is grounded in metacognition, “thinking about their own thinking regarding their decision-making processes and outcomes” (p. 82).

Throughout my years as a principal, I was watchful of how the worth of a Catholic educational leader was understood and validated. Is it in obtaining a district level position? It is being moved to a larger school? Is it by accumulating leadership awards? Such extrinsic validation ranks high amongst leaders yearning to climb the hierarchal ranks of their career. In Catholic educational leadership, is this standard applicable? Is there in fact a different criterion for success? If indeed Catholic educational leadership is to be considered a vocation and ministry, then perhaps validation of success needs to be expressed and assessed using a different matrix. In return, vocation and ministry, as explained by Buijs (2005), may “be grounded within a religious worldview, as coming from God and formation part of a divine plan for one’s particular life...and implies a personal commitment because of its focus on a call and its aspect of service” (pp. 336-338).

Similar to Thomas’s experience, I tried to prepare myself for leadership by serving the community. About 10 years ago, I started a little tradition on Boxing Day and Easter Monday. We prepare dinner for the families staying at Ronald McDonald House. It is about 60 people we cook for. My Godchildren and their mom, who is my best friend for
nearly 40 years, our neighbour friends and their little guy, sometimes my brother, and any other person who wishes to join us. We meet at RMH for two in the afternoon and we serve a home cooked meal by 5:00. It is routine twice every year. It helps us support families who are struggling with illness. They are always so grateful and they share with us their journey. While preparing a large meal is often the last thing we want to do after Christmas and Easter, we find the energy and leave with a renewed sense of purpose. This is how I extend my understanding of vocation and ministry beyond the walls of my school. I share this experience with Thomas:

Okay, so this is my new thing. You know, in hotel rooms when they give you all the toiletries. I actually collect them and then back home I divide them up into Ziploc bags. I take them to the Mustard Seed. I figure they can hand those out to people in need. I’m like you, Thomas. You know us Italians with holiday meals. Well, there are leftover and leftovers. So, the next day I make soup or sandwiches. Then my husband and I drive to the inner city and hand it out to people on the street. I am really trying to feed my own call to vocation and ministry as a leader.

As the discussion of ministry and vocation develops, Thomas and I divulge that neither of us shares these experiences with others. For the purpose of this study, however, it is important to highlight these experiences, as they were deliberately pursued to grow in faith formation and we wish to highlight how we have sought them out purposefully, specifically for deepening the understanding of ministry and vocation in our leadership. Thomas highlights that a leader is called to action, and these experiences of active service are catalysts in Catholic formation. Our Pope has invited all faithful to go out to the peripheries and minister to those in need. Thomas articulates how this service is important
in the formation of Catholic identity and leadership style. He explains how service is an aspect of Catholic religion that urges us to seek opportunities where we are able to reach out to others in a humble spirit; not as a hierarchical leader, but as a servant. Thomas shares:

I don’t tell people that I do these things. Only to a few people know that are close to my family. But it’s not something I want to share. I feel kind of embarrassed when people bring it up because I don’t do it for that [recognition]. I do it because I just want to do it.

Many years into my leadership journey, I met two individuals, Sister Annata Brockman and Fr. Jim Corrigan, who forever changed my understanding of Catholic educational leadership. Terms such as ministry and vocation, which I had whimsically tossed about in professional circles, perplexed me to redefine for myself what Catholic leadership truly entails. As Sister Annata Brockman would say, “dear…it is about serving others…and walking humbly with our Lord.” Fr. Jim, with his piercing blue eyes, would remind me that the Holy Spirit stirs deep within our soul and helps us to answer the calling of God. When I questioned ‘why?’, they helped me articulate and believe I was serving God through my leadership. Together my participants and I have come to understand Catholic educational leadership as ministry and vocation, as guided by Sister Annata and Fr. Jim: Ministry is in the service of others and vocation in the answering to God’s call.

**Relationships Underscore Catholic Identity: Ties that Bind and Ties that Break**

As the threads of participant findings weave alongside one another, it is in relationships with others that culminate in the informing, shaping, and influencing of our
Catholic identity. Given my research question, participants tried to understand how their experiences, across various landscapes, contributed to their Catholic leadership and how they understood it to be distinct from their secular colleagues. Participants in this study clearly and consistently referenced their relationship with family, friends, colleagues, clergy, parents and their children, in varying situations, as bearing significant importance to both understanding their faith and impetus for giving testimony through lived action. Theresa explains the importance of living and growing up in a Catholic family important in her formation:

How do you form Catholic leaders? If I had the answer I’d probably be writing a book about it, but I think that it’s like anything else, you try to have leadership classes, Catholic leadership classes, formation classes, or some of the leaders go to Newman Theological College, but I don’t know if that’s all there is. I think that you have to have lived a Catholic life growing up to have it be more authentic in your leadership. I found that living in a Catholic home and going to Catholic schools really gave an advantage when it came to being a principal.

Charlie attributes faith formation in relationship with his wife:

One of the blessings in my life is my wife. She helped me out on that journey. Saturday at 5:00 we go to church. That is what we do. We honour that even if the Eskimos or the Oilers are on. Thank God for PVR. I guess for me, and I did it without knowing it. Small events, they form who you are. It has an impact. It’s about how you handle things. Your experiences in relationship with others form who you are and form your faith.

Thomas adds:
My parents, mentors, and the people around me, they were the big influence on how I grew up and how I continue to journey on my faith road. I guess the key is that we are not alone. We grow in community with others and we learn from others and we support each other.

It is these intimate relationships, participants agreed, that provided the bedrock for the shaping of their Catholic identity. Alongside others, participants saw themselves changing and gaining insight into their sense of self. In addition, overcoming challenging experiences was described as influencing the shaping of the participants’ Catholic identity. Participants stated that maturity and growth to understand one’s faith is to recognize that everyone is on a faith journey both individually and in relation with others and no one ever “arrives” at a final version of self-understanding.” Rather, Catholic identity is a work in progress. Charlie explains:

We are church for so many kids. It is not a priority with their families. The more disappointing part for me is that it’s not often a priority for our staff. When teachers get that priest reference to get on board that’s fine. But if you are looking at getting a continuous contract [a contract of employment that is renewed until one of the parties terminates] we want to see another figure for ongoing commitment. It’s about helping those people (staff) on the journey. I was there as a university student. Was I a consistent churchgoer? No, I wasn’t.

Charlie expresses disappointment in what could be interpreted as implied expectations within the role of Catholic educator – such as that of attending Mass. Interestingly enough, Charlie expresses his own understood inadequacy in being able to meet these inferred expectations at a younger age. Thomas explores how relationships
have been vital in his Catholic leadership journey. As a leader, it is easy to become overwhelmed with the administrative role and overlook the humanistic role. As Thomas explains, he deliberately seeks to understand his school community on both a personal and professional basis:

As a Catholic educational leader, it is important for me to know the people I work with. If you’re an administrator who is not strong on relationships and people then you are not going to know whether they’re struggling or suffering or going through some challenging times. You need to speak to people and get to know them. Leadership is relational work. It’s not always business. There are two levels of conversation. There’s a business level and a personal level. Once you get to know them they’re more willing to come in and talk about anything whether it be to share a good thing or share something they’re struggling in the classroom with. There has to be trust, loyalty, and honesty.

Theresa shared her experience as a first-year principal. Realizing that relationships were very important in her leadership journey, she decided to watch those who modeled it best, beginning with her secretary.

I watched this secretary. Everyone came to her because she was accepting of everybody no matter what walk of life. It was sad to see what some of our parents were going through…some of them had harmful lifestyles. She was always embracing them. She was always finding the good in them and she would always find time to talk to them. They would allow that only because she was so accepting and she built those relationships. That’s what a leader should be. A leader should be a person that accepts all in the community. They accept people
and they try to help. They need to be listened to and you can build a relationship just by listening…by living those gospel values all the time and showing it in action was very important. My secretary really understood the importance of building positive relationships. Then it was easy to teach them the other gospel values. This is what I tried to always to in my leadership. Whatever students, parents, and teachers needed I always listened. With my colleagues it was very important, especially in the later years when I was responsible for faith formation for the district. It was really important for me to build those relationships even though I didn’t always have the gift of time.

These examples shared by participants demonstrate an understanding of self that is both reflective and introspective. It is easy to become drawn to the daily grind of administration, and ignore the need to nurture relationships of trust, understanding, and mutual respect. Dialogue is important in Catholic educational leadership, as it provides the catalyst to creating an inclusive learning community where the voices of diversity is not only heard but valued. Theresa’s secretary demonstrates a valuable lesson in acceptance and accompanying others on their faith journey.

Cook and Simonds (2011) concur with the importance of relationships by stating:

Relationships are at the heart of what it means to be a Catholic school. Each human being is called to be in a loving relationship with self, God, and others and is encouraged to see the interconnectedness of all creation…Catholic schools are places of relationship building, and it is out of these life-giving relationships that the mission priorities of the school emerge. (p. 323)
Participants concurred that Catholic educational leadership involves first and foremost having a relationship with God. In conversation with participants, it became clear that God was the spiritual dimension ever present in their relationships with others throughout their leadership journey.

Charlie shares his understanding of how being in relationship with God extends to being in relationship with others thus indicating an alignment with the ecclesiology of Church as Mystical Community. Within this ecclesiology, a fellowship of persons with God and with one another through Christ, nurtures unity, mutual concern, and good will rooted in life affirming relationship. Charlie articulates how God is present in tragedy if he is invited to enter:

In order to be in a right relationship with others, you need to be in a right relationship with God. I think that is really powerful. Relationships change. Relationships with God change. Life has its ebb and flow, and up and down. It’s got to be tough for people who step away because of a tragic event in their life. Isn’t that when you really need a faith life and God in your life? I think of Footprints in the sand. How can you try to get through this on your own?

Charlie’s understanding rooted in his allusion to Footprints in the Sand, refers to a poem where Jesus replies to a troubled man assuring him that during difficult times of suffering, Jesus does not abandon or ignore. It is precisely in these times of greatest need when we feel most alone that in fact Jesus is carrying us.

Participants shared that there is a need for Catholic educational leaders to nurture positive relationships also within their parish. This relationship is integral to serving a common mission of building God’s Kingdom on earth. A culture of mutual respect founded
on a supportive relationship generates meaningful dialogue. Through such dialogue a place of mutual support and respect is established. Theresa explains how such relational connections contribute to faith formation.

It is important that we build a culture of communal spiritual growth. That means having a close relationship with the parish. When you have a parish connected to the school it is amazing how stronger the spiritual influence is. It is good to have priests and nuns speaking with the students on different themes. Having a strong connection with the parish contributes immensely to the culture of the school. Sometimes as the leader you have to initiate it yourself because parish priests are very busy. Some of them are also elderly. Others are not used to working with kids, so I made it my mission, every time I moved to a new school, to start that relationship. The rewards were amazing. You can develop such positive relationships. When there is a relationship with the parish, doing sacramental preparation is so powerful. We have to remember some of our students are Catholic but never have seen the inside of a church.

Charlie’s point of building a culture of communal growth is well taken in the sense that our lives are a kaleidoscope of experiences and alongside these experiences we are brought into relationships with others. During the course of this study, tragedy has indeed struck several participants through family crisis, and myself, leading a school community in the midst of two student suicides. These experiences challenge the notion of faith and invite us to further seek understanding of how to invite Jesus in carrying us through these times of heartache. It is during such events that we ask “why” questions of our faith and challenge the notion of a loving God. How could a loving God allow such
things to happen? Barry shared his experience:

My family crisis makes me think about the work that we do, as Catholic school administrators. I think I'm starting to see a lot of things through different eyes. I want to talk about the light. This crisis could be a very dark place. I want to talk about moments of light that I've seen...that the light of Christ comes through, through other incarnate forms through people that we meet. We say we see the face of Christ in others, right? It’s about lived experience shaping us. Well, I can say, unequivocally, that what's happened with this crisis, it’s already fundamentally reshaped how I lead, and by that I mean things like a new sense of priority...urgency about learning and the vocation of education. Another big thing is patience, you never know, these people that you're leading, you never know the road that they're walking, right? Just like some people won't know what I'm walking. The generosity of people...ultimately, Catholic education is about relationships. It's about leading people and just realising that the people are fundamentally good and it's unfortunate, sometimes, that it takes something like a crisis to teach you that. As a leader, I want to be more patient with people, to be gentler with people, to be more generous with people. Those are things that family crisis has taught me about leadership.

The sense of relationship is important in a school community with special consideration that every teacher is on a different faith journey. However, Catholic educational leaders, according to Thomas, need to be mindful that it is within a supportive school community that teachers gain confidence to grow into their faith with maturity and guidance. Thomas shared:
Every teacher is on a different faith journey. That is part of the faith journey of growing, maturing, and being confident. I think that is a big piece. We can talk about our young teachers how do they make faith more a part of their life, are they practicing are they not practicing. I am of the opinion that there’s a maturity level that has to happen. Thinking back, I don’t know that I went to church every Sunday when I graduated. I have a better understanding of it and more appreciation. As I get older, more every year now it’s becoming more a predominant piece of me.

With respect to leading a school community, participants unequivocally expressed the importance of faith formation being deeply nurtured and rooted in relationship with others. Because the journey of faith formation is cultivated over time, across various landscapes, and in relationship with others, having excellent Catholic teachers is the lynchpin for the prosperity of Catholic education. Rymarz (2016) states, “What makes a Catholic school unique in many ways is that it expects teachers to support the ethos of the school and to witness to the deepest identity of the school – that is, to bear living witness to Christ and his teachings” (p. 114). Participants affirmed that priority should be given to such a significant goal, by allocating necessary financial and human resources to ensure that teachers are mentored on their faith journey. Although noble in theory, financial allocations to faith formation fall short on the list of priorities. Charlie explains:

We would be naïve to think that those first year teachers are long practicing Catholics. There are many that step away and step back in. They drift away from the Church. We have to keep asking ourselves how we can help the newbies on the faith journey. We have to remind them that how they carry themselves is
important. Our schools are changing. They are not the same Catholic buildings. There are struggles in faith formation. That’s why I like the word – forge. Forge means that it’s not just smooth sailing that there are bumps, cliffs, and all kinds of terrain. There is a bit of a struggle in faith formation.

Charlie provides the analogy of experienced leaders forging a path for our young teachers so that they are able to shape and inform their Catholic identity. Once teachers have a confident sense of self in faith, they are positioned well to articulate this within their personal and professional life. While this takes time, it is also important to respect that each teacher is on an individualized personal journey. As Charlie explains, it also requires a commitment from veteran teachers to provide mentorship and support:

I think of forging as a triangle. So, the front of the boat, whatever’s in front of it, it’s going to forge a way through. That’s the picture I get in my mind. I think in terms of that we are forging a path for these young teachers. It’s through that model of witness and articulation. I am a football guy. Picture this…so you’ve got the blocking back and you’ve got the tailback behind them. So, the blocking back is going to typically be the bigger guy, and he’s clearing the way, he’s forging a path. And the running back, who’s got the ball, runs in that security. It clears a path. This analogy of leadership resonates with me.

Charlie uses football imagery as a way of illustrating how Catholic educational leaders need to situate themselves in close relationship with teacher. Because of the very nature of their leadership role, they are at the forefront, always looking and providing opportunities for staff to develop in their faith. Given the array of responsibilities for Catholic educational leaders, the inclination might be to delegate this responsibility to
others, such as the school chaplain or department heads. However, according to the participants in this study, doing so dilutes its importance. It is taken for granted that teachers need professional development in their curriculum area. Although often overlooked for an assortment of reasons, often financial in nature, spiritual professional development is equally important. Just as the Catholic educational leader is expected to be an instructional leader, they must be recognized as the spiritual leader in the school.

Thomas explains how he intentionally moved from school to school in order to work within a variety of programs and alongside different colleagues. He greatly valued the learning he acquired throughout his travels. The diversity of these experiences, in relationship with others, nurtured his faith formation:

I think a big part of what shaped me in terms of my growth has been exposure to a lot of different cultures in my teaching. I had a whole lot of different experiences. I wanted different experiences. Every time I went to a different school – behavioral – Indigenous – ESL – inner city – affluent – every piece of that has created something in me and remains with me. Your faith is a part of your identity.

Barry, likewise, discussed the complexity of 21st century school communities where there is an ever-increasing population of English Language Learners, Indigenous students, non-Catholic students, and refugee students. Such diversity in students has led many schools to offer differentiated, individualized, and specialized learning opportunities. This is compounded with an array of programs of choice such as Hockey, Soccer, Baseball, Cree, and Spanish, Tagalog, Ukrainian, International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, and Career and Technology studies. These programs provide a variety of programs to better
meet the diverse learning needs of students. The tension manifests when the plethora of programs takes over the life and culture of a school, sometimes at the expense of Catholic identity. Teachers and students are pulled in different directions. Barry explains how these programs can displace the Catholic identity of a school and the struggle with how I bring all of these diverse individuals back to our Catholic story. How do these different experiences help us in the formation of our Catholic identity in relation to one another’s Catholic identity and diverse responsibilities in the school culture? There are such diverse loyalties and priorities. The hockey coaches think about how they should run the goalie clinic, the basketball coach is convinced this is the year for that big championship win, the Math teacher is concerned about the slow progress of her students in understanding concepts. This diversity of responsibility and priorities creates divisiveness, in the sense that cliques are formed amongst staff, as each strives to meet the varying needs of their students in accordance to their specialty program. Participants expressed that these tensions can be resolved in a positive and enriching manner. It is when they are ignored and taken for granted that the conflict festers.

A relationship in faith takes concentrated time and effort, and often is the afterthought for many teachers who are endeavoring to meet the requirements of an already challenging workload. Catholic educational leaders need to be mindful of a teacher’s workload and recognize that growing in the faith does not happen spontaneously. Thomas concludes:

There are different levels of formation amongst our teachers even if they identify as Catholic. It is a journey and I see it even in my own kids. It is more than just going to church. It’s more than just talking. It’s everything. It’s a journey that we
have to continue to realize is not easy. We can’t expect to hire a brand-new teacher and expect them to be where you and I are at right now. Just like kids go through physical growth so is our spiritual growth. It’s gradual. As leaders, we need to continue to water and nurture it and till that soil so the seeds can grow. Those roots are formed and they branch out and continue to grow and strengthen underground. We all learn from each other.

This is the second year several Catholic school districts commenced working with Archbishop Miller’s ‘Five Marks of Catholic Identity’. While there have been professional development opportunities, it takes time to actualize into daily practice. Participants articulated that it would be presumptuous to assume teachers enter the profession with the same development of faith formation consequently these Five Marks of Catholic Identity, as Theresa explained, do not explicitly state a “beginner’s starting point.” It is in relationship with others, where meaningful learning takes place. Participants in this study agree, that uniform and regimented faith formation is impossible given the numerous variables of experience, personally and professionally, each teacher holds. Catholic educational leaders, according to the participants, must value and honor the unique gifts and talents individual teachers possess.

While participants noted their own faith formation was nurtured over time, and that their relationships with other people contributed to their Catholic identity, they expressed disappointment that new teachers are lacking in faith formation. Interestingly enough, however, what the “standard” for faith formation is for teachers remains unclear. The underlying tension of what is experienced versus what is expected with regards to faith formation resonates a message of contradiction and lack of understanding. If
Catholic educational leaders do not take time to foster meaningful relationships with their teachers, their otherwise well-intentioned plan for faith formation might not meet the needs of the teacher. Charlie and Thomas explicitly challenge Catholic educational leaders to forge a path for young teachers and support their faith journey by providing unwavering guidance and encouragement. Given that the participants in this study have described Catholic identity as static versus dynamic, it cannot be assumed that teachers enter the profession with the same level of formation in the faith.

Participants highlighted that faith formation is developed in relationship alongside colleagues, students, parents, family, church, and community. It is interesting to note that several participants referenced such influential relationships as being formative from the early years of their career. However, there continues to be a gap between the participants’ experiences with their own faith formation and the disappointment referenced concerning young teachers lacking in faith formation. The learning that is a result of working, talking, listening, and watching alongside others, certainly proved valuable to participants over the course of their career. Certainly, one might expect the same timeline would be respected for young Catholic teachers and administrators. Regardless, all participants agreed that isolation is not favourable to faith formation.

*I remember my first year as a music teacher teaching in isolation. I was so proud of myself getting ready for my first Christmas concert--actually two Christmas concerts, because my time was split between two schools. Being the ever-eager teacher to please, I naively agreed that my organizing the Christmas concerts would be fine. It was a week before the concerts and my assistant principal received a phone call from a parent asking why the Christmas concert program was full of secular music. Did the music teacher not*
know this was a Catholic school? I was sure I was going to be fired. Thinking back, I ask myself now how could I have missed that? I missed it because I would not see further than the task at hand. The “to do list” was filled with ordering chairs, selecting music, recording the music so other teachers could practice with the children, lining up the children from shortest to tallest, harmonizing the instrumentation, and possibly even ensuring that every child stood safely on the risers. Not one other teacher in the school suggested that I might consider a bit of Catholic permeation in the evening. This raises the question of whether or not permeation is reducible to the choice of music.

Certainly, one would expect that the Catholic educational leader during this situation would have offered me some advice or at the very least discuss with me the expectations of a Catholic Christmas concert. Yes, as a Catholic teacher, I should have known better, but maybe with a bit of help, I could have avoided the conflict altogether. While the logistics of the concert were discussed at staff meetings explicitly, the faith content of the concert, was ignored. At the time, I did not even give faith a second thought and focused almost exclusively on pleasing my colleagues afraid that I might be judged as incompetent. I certainly did not have the rapport to ask them questions regarding faith.

Years later, suffering the deaths of two students, I witnessed how relationships can greatly influence the faith life of a school. It was my experience, that during these tragic times, students would often leave their classrooms and congregate in the chapel, light candles, pray the rosary during lunch, and even initiate conversations with our clergy. The yearning of being in close relationship to each other and to our faith soothed the aching pain that accompanies such tragedies.
Herein lie the findings of five Catholic educational leaders who each have considerable experience in Catholic education. Although a shifting landscape for Catholic education is in our midst, the lifeblood of renewal is firmly anchored in the dedicated commitment articulated by Saint Theresa of Calcutta, “seeking the face of God in everything, everyone, all the time, and his hand in every happening; this is what it means to be contemplative in the heart of the world.” As I am left to analyze these finding, I ponder the impressions each participant gathered from this inquiry and how collectively we have influenced each other’s understanding of the past, present, and future of Catholic educational leadership.
Chapter 5 Analysis

Sister Annata Brockman: Act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly

I sit across from Sister Annata Brockman, a pioneer in the field of Catholic education in Alberta. It is in a sweltering hot summer evening. Her apartment door is propped open with a rock, in the hope that all passers-by will stop in to her small nest to exchange a greeting, a smile; a kind gesture of hospitality.

I have known Sr. Annata for as long as I can remember. She has attended many school district functions, was the guest of honor at many gala dinners, and the humble recipient of many prestigious teaching and leadership awards. Sr. Annata even has a Catholic school named after her in the west end of Edmonton. She has inspired and challenged many teachers, many administrators, and many politicians with her simple words of faith.

On this evening, I sit across from her worried about her health. She has suffered two falls and a lung embolism. Breathing with an oxygen line under her nose, Sr. Annata smiles and looks to me with glistening eyes. She is ready to begin our conversation; eager to share her stories. I have unknowingly waited for each conversation since my first thoughts of completing such a study on Catholic educational leadership.

“Back then, being the only female in a class of 23 males was quite different,” she says, chuckling to herself. “I was the first female principal for the Edmonton Catholic School District. Well, that too was quite the challenge.”

Sr. Annata takes comfort in these words while reminding me that being Catholic back in the day, and still today, is all about Jesus.
“Then and now, it is all the same. Help students love Jesus,” she says with great intent. Sr. Annata radiates great confidence as she speaks these words; the smile from her lips never faltering; the strength of her words, overshadowing the frailty of her body.

“Help students, staff, community do three things,” she advises. “Act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly.” Sister Annata reinforces for me the ultimate goal of Catholic education. It is to lead students to be in relationship with Jesus Christ by understanding his teachings and learning from His example. Being a star athlete or a brilliant academic might be worldly desires, Sister Annata explains, but not heavenly qualifiers. She tells me clearly, the goal of Catholic education is to lead students to sainthood…. to prepare them for eternal life…in Heaven.

“Dear,” she says. “When you do this, you give witness to the love of Jesus.” This, she reassures me, is the burden of responsibility placed upon Catholic leaders who are entrusted with nurturing a faith community both for students and for staff.

“Show Jesus loves you and others will believe. Others will come to know Jesus on their own terms in their own time.”

Sister Annata quotes Ecclesiastes; “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens dear.” Tears well up in my eyes, because I am reminded of how often I have doubted and been unfaithful to this. Sr. Annata passed away on October 25, 2016 at the age of 89. Her picture is intentionally placed in my office to the left of my computer screen. I speak to her daily and imagine her response to me; a response always accompanied with her radiant smile, reminding me of God’s love.
I begin this chapter of analysis by sharing my story of Sr. Annata Brockman. Through her gentle guidance, I was able to witness first hand her devotion to faith and her willingness to nurture and support the faith formation of all in her midst. Her gentle spirit served as a model of compassion and love. Sister Annata embodied Catholic education as a humanizing education for every child. On her funeral prayer card she writes, “May you experience God’s great love for you today and always.” This indeed was her greatest leadership lesson to me.

**Overview**

In Canada, there are, generally speaking, three types of Catholic schools: those that are publicly funded, such as those in Northwest Territories, Yukon, Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Alberta; those that receive partial funding (British Columbia and Manitoba); and those that receive no funding (Quebec, Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island). Public discourse, encompassing the consideration of Catholic education as parental choice, the duplication of cost concerning public education, and the number of non-Catholic students attending, certainly all create tension between an optimistic versus pessimistic outlook on the future of Catholic education and its relevance. As explained by Rymarz (2016), "one major problem with the optimistic/pessimistic dichotomy is that it tends to substitute for reasoned debate, dialogue, and discussion. Perhaps most importantly, it can paralyze future action" (p. 10). Respectful dialogue becomes an important consideration as the acrimonious debate regarding publicly funded Catholic education continues. Tensions exist between opposing viewpoints across the educational landscape in Alberta suggesting there are people believing Catholic education is an elitist, self-serving proposition serving no valid
purpose other than maintaining an antiquated institution, while others believe Catholic education serves the mission of the Church and gives choice to parents wishing a faith-based education for their children. It is unclear why Catholic schools would be described as elitist, given the experience of participants, in particular Charlie, who served in a school that ranked in the top three of a large metro school board in Alberta. Such claims appear unsubstantiated and misleading.

As Catholic educational leaders continue to explore how their lived experience shapes, informs, and influences their Catholic identity in 21st-century schools, Catholic education’s feasibility dangles perilously as the pendulum of change marks the beat of a changing landscape. The existence of Catholic education is presently being challenged in Alberta and the participants in this study, as articulated in the findings, strive to develop their understanding of the uniqueness of Catholic education within their leadership role and articulate this distinctiveness to others. My research question offers meaningful analysis and support for ongoing debate and dialogue about the future of Catholic education in the 21st century.

Daily media headlines read: Ontario Catholic high schools shouldn’t press students to study Religion, EPSB votes to re-join Public School Boards’ Association of Alberta, Edmonton Public to debate single publicly funded school system, Saskatchewan government appealing ruling on Catholic school funding, Single publicly funded school system the best route for Alberta, Canada’s Publicly funded Religious schools have to go, and Red Deer Public Schools trustees vote narrowly in support of single education system. Catholic education and its viability is being challenged on a daily basis in regards to its relevance. This opposition is further fuelled by the former Minister of Education
David King (1979-1986), who through his campaign beginning March, 2017 “Our Idea: Inclusive Diverse Education for All” is calling to disestablish separate schools in Alberta and suggesting that a referendum must be forthcoming calling for one fully amalgamated public school system. It cannot be overstated that Catholic leadership will be at the forefront of wrestling with complex issues encompassing Catholic education and determining its future direction and significance within a 21\textsuperscript{st}-century society. To inform our understanding of Catholic Educational leadership in Alberta the analysis of the participant findings reveals three major themes with sub-themes for discussion. Themes, according to Sparkes and Smith (2014), are reoccurring patterns that convey significance in answering the research question (p. 117). Participants in this study generated three themes with supporting subthemes as detailed evidence. They are:

1. Inclusivity and distinctiveness of Catholic Education; lack of coherence and articulation of Catholic education:
   - Religion Brands Catholic Education Distinct
   - Every Child Created in the Likeness and Image of God
   - Catholic and Non-Catholic Students

2. Bridging a singular notion of Catholic identity with the plurality of Catholic identities:
   - Singular Notion of Catholic Identity
   - Complexity of Catholic Identity Serves a Variety of Expression
   - Charism: The Bridge to Catholic Identities

3. Christocentric culture aligning with Christocentric Leadership:
   - Tension in Catholic Leadership and Beyond
   - In Relationship with Christ
Inclusivity and Distinctiveness of Catholic Education; lack of coherence and articulation of Catholic education

Participants in this study articulated the importance of Catholic education as a humanizing education situated in serving the diverse academic, social, and spiritual needs of children. Being recognized for its safe and caring environment, enriched with faith formation permeated in all aspects of school life, is central to what the role of Catholic educational leader entails. Three related subthemes thread together the general theme of Catholic education as both distinct in its role while remaining inclusive in its approach. They are: affirming that Religion brands Catholic education distinct, that every child is created in the likeness and image of God, and acceptance of Catholic and non-Catholic students.

Religion brands Catholic education distinct.

As noted by all participants, the justification for Catholic schools to exist as a publically funded educational choice whilst remaining relevant in the 21st-century hinges insecurely on their ability to demonstrate and articulate their distinct and unique characteristics. Popular opinion suggests that Catholic schools are branded Catholic because Religion is taught. The Catholic educational leaders in this study stated that it is not solely the teaching of Religion that makes Catholic schools distinctly different from public schools, private, or secular schools. Hancock (2005) concurs:

When we reflect upon the aims of Catholic education, we might be tempted to think that, as the Gospel message of salvation and our relationship to God is crucial, the identity and distinctiveness of Catholic education lies only in religious
studies. In other words, the tendency might be to think that a Catholic school and a secular school do not really differ except for religious instruction. (p. 33)

Religious instruction, although not the sole marker of distinctiveness in Catholic school, remains of vital importance as expressed by John Paul II (1979). He does not mince words when exhorting what a Catholic school should be:

[Catholic education] would no longer deserve this title if, no matter how much it shone for its high level of teaching in non-religious matters, there were justification for reproaching it for negligence of deviation in strictly religious education…the special character of the Catholic school, the underlying reason for it, the reason why Catholic parents should prefer it, is precisely the quality of the religious instruction integrated into the education of the pupils. (1979, no. 69)

The formation of Catholic identity cannot be wholly reliant on the instruction of Religion and participants in this study consistently referenced the necessity for a coherent faith environment where explicit formation is lived through daily activities and interaction. That is the permeation of faith in every aspect of school life resulting in the opportunity for faith formation for all members of the school community in relationship and in context. This is what the, participant, articulated as authentic expression of Catholic identity. Being an excellent Catholic educator requires not only teaching, speaking, and living the faith in Religion class, but also permeating the faith in the classroom, hallways, playground, staff room, and in each subject area. As defined in the document *Permeation: Living Eucharist in the Learning Community*, “The notion of permeation flows from the central importance of the religious dimension of the school. The religious dimension can most authentically be expressed when all aspects of the life
of the school are developed fully” (Edmonton Catholic School District, 2002, pp.8-9).

Permeation does not come easily for everyone nor does it happen exclusively in the context of academic learning. Barry explained:

Permeation of faith does not come easy for everybody. The one thing I do know about permeation is that sometimes the work of the Spirit isn’t explicit. Just like the body, the real presence of Christ is availed behind the bread and the wine but it takes faith to believe that. Sometimes in the class, the permeation might not be the teacher permanently mentioning God. So maybe it’s the kid who’s struggling with that math problem and the teacher just kind of put their hand on them – on their shoulder. If that hand going on that shoulder is motivated by Christ’s mercy and Christ’s compassion for that child. That action is permeation. It might not be named, but it’s permeation.

Barry suggested that it is during the principal and teacher debrief where the teacher is able to explain their understanding of permeation and how it is witnessed in the classroom. A debrief meeting is held after a principal has observed a teacher’s lesson. The purpose is to discuss and provide feedback, with a collegial and respectful disposition, areas of strength and areas requiring growth. Barry builds on this illustrative example:

While I was putting my hand on Billy’s shoulder, watching him do that algorithm, I want you to know that I was saying a Hail Mary for him silently under my breath. Beautiful. Beautiful. That will teach the teacher to take it one step further. Why don’t you call Billy into your office Friday before he goes home and say, “Billy I just want you to know I’m really proud of you.” How you
struggled with those math problems. Before you go home for the weekend would you mind saying the Hail Mary with me?

As attested by the participants in this study, the implications for nurturing a permeated faith community lies in the leadership of the principal providing explicit opportunities for faith formation specifically in curriculum development. Cook (2015) advises, “schools should intentionally enculturate and educate students about the school’s particular mission, charism, and core values to make faith formation personal, local, and relevant and give students a sense of belonging” (p. 50). While it is understood that permeation is a somewhat abstract concept, deeply connected to one's understanding of their own Catholic identity both implicitly and explicitly often rooted in one's connectedness to the faith, participants noted their own faith journeys to be a work in progress being informed and shaped by their lived experiences. For an inexperienced teacher, much of their focus is on delivering the prescribed Program of Studies. The lived reality in school sometimes defaults to Religion as being the only distinctive feature due to the simple fact that permeation cannot be followed prescriptively from a teacher's manual. This does not bode well for the future of Catholic education when teachers feel ill equipped with the permeation of faith in curriculum and culture, and Catholic educational leaders do not make it a fundamental priority for professional development. Schuttlof'el (2013) reinforces this by stating, “a lack of intentionality about faith formation is a potentially dangerous position for anyone committed to the transmission of Catholic identity to the next generation” (p. 84).
Every child created in the likeness and image of God.

Specifically for students, faith formation involves educating the whole child with the core understanding that all humans are created in the likeness and image of God. While this statement underscores the obligation for inclusive practices, public discourse has focused its attention on the inclusivity of LGBTQ students in Catholic schools. This tension possibly manifested from a diverse understanding of Church, as illustrated by Dulles, and identity, as explained by Arbuckle. In addition, it is more likely for tensions to arise from disagreements about concrete issues, such as LGBTQ, rather than emerging from theory. A few Catholic trustees, responsible for creating policy, potentially without any understanding of school culture, who had elicited minimal stakeholder collaboration and were possibly deficient of any educational experience, publically challenged Catholic educators. Their stance suggested Catholic schools were not safe educational spaces for LGBTQ students in Alberta. Catholic educational leaders in this study fervently asserted their position of serving the needs of every child, regardless of circumstance. Respect, dignity, and honoring the development of each individual student in collaboration with their parents, remains a touchstone of Catholic education. Sultmann and Brown (2016) further illuminate:

This view…that people are made in God’s own image and likeness…is a view that culminates in both blessing and responsibility. The practical implication of this belief is seen in the attitude of educators towards students and inclusive of behaviours that honour uniqueness, acknowledge dignity, develop gifts, observe rights and build relationships. (p.76)
Having said the above, the participants in this study acknowledged Catholic education as being misrepresented as evening after evening, media reported Catholic schools to be discriminatory places of learning where LGBTQ students were outcast by their very own peers and teachers, ostensibly, in direct contradiction of what was understood to be the lived experience in Catholic schools. Ironically, Catholic educational leaders, in Alberta, remained silent and did not respond with examples of inclusion or testimonials from parents and students. Tensions manifested as Catholic educators attested to their commitment to safe and caring classrooms and their inclusive practices versus what was being portrayed and communicated in the media. Respecting the diversity of every student, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, and the commitment to inclusive practices, although lacking articulation, according to Catholic educational leaders in this study, remained a priority. In addition, Charlie, Theresa, Barry, and Thomas, all agreed that while inclusive attitudes were present in the culture of Catholic schools, it was difficult for leaders to articulate this within the public sphere.

A problem rests with Catholic educational leaders, either elected or appointed, in their inability to articulate how inclusivity in Catholic schools translates into lived action. Fincham (2010) states, “another challenge for leadership in Catholic schools relates to concerns about the appointment and retention of staff conversant with the Catholic ethos and mission...a challenge for leaders in Catholic schools is to articulate a clear vision of Christian faith and Gospel values” (p.74). Donlevy (2002) explains how "Vatican II opened wide the doors of the Catholic Church not only to new ideas but also to inclusivity that carried with it the challenge of translating itself from the intellectual world of authoritative Church text to what Habermas (1971) called the life-world of the
community” (p.101). Participants in this study maintain that the lifeblood of Catholic schools is rooted in compassion, integrity, and respect, and within this milieu, a diversity of student needs is served. However, it remains problematic how this attitude is articulated to community and stakeholders. Discerning how best to serve the social, emotional, academic, and spiritual needs of a student becomes increasingly problematic when policies are written with little consultation, and without a working knowledge of how Catholic schools operate on a day-to-day, student-by-student manner. Developing policies and regulations in an attempt to satisfy all stakeholders, without consultation of any stakeholder, seems counterintuitive to the process of serving a democratic society. Often, as Thomas stated, policies do not capture the nuances of a situation and Catholic educational leaders need to honor that, “it is not about rules being black and white. It is about honouring the spirit of the law and serving those in need.”

It is important to note that some Catholic educational leaders both in Catholic and Public school districts, along with a growing segment of community stakeholders perceive that Church doctrine is exclusive, and hence find it problematic because it poses a barrier to their providing and receiving services from the school. This sense of incongruence remains a high level-contributing factor to the discourse of moving to one publically funded school system. It is relevant to the discussion here to explain how this manifested itself in the governance of one particular Catholic school district, and specifically within only a few select Catholic trustees of that District. All participants referenced the manner in which this particular group of trustees conducted themselves, as being contributing factors to the contextual discourse of whether Catholic education is relevant in the 21st century and illustrated how this relevance lacked any articulation or
When disorder and disarray with this Catholic school district became a public concern, Education Minister Eggen issued the following statement, "It has become apparent that the board…must improve its practice. To ensure this happens, I have appointed a firm with extensive experience in improving board governance to assist …with its current issues" (ECSD News release, Website). After working with the Board for one year, Consultant Donald Cummings (2016) reported:

…the degree of conflict and confusion was far more significant than originally contemplated or planned…lacking any consequence and accountability which underscores the current “individually-defined role of Trustee…there is no common agreement on foundational [Board] documents. Multiple viewpoints on ‘what is right' prevail, and indeed there isn't even consensus on how to address the processing of changing these [governance] documents. Historical conflict…shifting coalitions…and lack of a common framework…impede progress. (p. 15)

Noted in the recommendations of moving forward:

A critical area of attention for the future must in the personal and collective learning that must take place in governance theory, contemporary school board governance practice…and general competencies necessary to perform in the role of a Trustee in a complex public policy setting of school system governance, especially given the stakeholder complexity in a faith-based system such as this District. (Cummings, 2016, p. 15)

Cummings himself notes that a faith-based system requires a particular stance on governance. As articulated by the participants in this study, moving forward requires an
understanding, expression, and application of Catholic identity across multiple areas of leadership in relationship with stakeholders; both insiders and outsiders to Catholic education. Consequently, upon release of this report, comments from the public portrayed Catholic education as redundant to the established public school system and wasteful to taxpayer money. In the editorial section of the newspaper, public comments included, “could someone remind me please what is the rationale for needing a separate system and board…scrap the whole thing…Albertan students deserve better than a religious education, and so do taxpayers…its way past time to stop funding…if you want religion you should pay for it out of your own pocket and not ask tax payers to fund this…privatize the Catholic school board” (French, 2016). What is important to note for the purposes of this study, is that during this time, insider and outsider supporters of Catholic education lacked articulation of what constitutes Catholic education resulting in a veil of silence to clothe the landscape. This contributed greatly to confusion, misunderstanding, and divisiveness.

It was clearly evident that the findings from Cummings’ report was the spark that ignited a slowly burning issue related to the need for Catholic education; the topic of discontinuing a system being a far leap from questions about how well it is governed. Following these events, Simons (2016) writes, “True, Edmonton’s local Catholic board is a hot mess of back-biting civil war. But public boards have failed in the past, too. Just because this particular group of Catholic trustees is in perpetual chaos is not an excuse to shut down Catholic education province-wide” (Edmonton Journal, 2016, July 15). What the author of this passage failed to acknowledge is that conflict arose from, as Arbuckle expressed, the perceived singular notion of Catholic identity. When failing to
acknowledge that one’s understanding of Catholic idea may vary from another, although anchored by common core, disagreement is unavoidable. Participants in this study clearly indicated that this example of conflict with this particular school board, served as a public exemplar of the inability to fully articulate Catholic identity to self and others.

In relation to the research question, participants articulated how this unfolding discourse surrounding the dysfunction of this particular school board contributed to the misconception of a Catholic identity within the wider public sphere, that does not give witness to the dignity of every and does not reflect the lived reality in schools. Although manifested in the task the writing of a policy, the heart of the conflict remains situated in the disagreement among different Catholic viewpoints, from different identity perspectives. Equally challenging was the inability of expressing Catholic identity to the broader community in a meaningful and engaging manner, whilst respecting the diversity of opinion and experience. By referencing these events repeatedly and specifically, participants articulated their frustration with how the behavior of a few was unnecessarily fuelling the fire to a heated debate regarding Catholic education as a whole. Additionally, participants added, it demonstrated the devastating harm Catholic educational leaders could cause when they are unable to respectfully acknowledge the conceptual expression of how inclusion necessitates respect for diversity, a foundational component to the formation of Catholic identity, was being witnessed and lived out in Catholic schools. The expression of how inclusion requires respect for diversity, according to the participants in this study, renewed and reaffirmed their commitment to serving the needs of all children with respect, dignity, and care. Respecting the dignity of every child was integral to their Catholic identity and their understanding of how this was integral for the inclusion of all
students. In turn, being able to express and articulate the conceptual expression of inclusion, respect for diversity, and honoring the dignity of every child, remain foundational characteristics to shaping, informing, and influencing Catholic identity, is paramount to the future of distinctive Catholic publicly funded education.

Daily damage to Catholic education as a whole, according to the participants in this study, can be done when Catholic educational leaders do not take the seriousness of their vocation to heart. Understanding that every child is a child of God provokes a commitment that cannot ever be compromised. If a Catholic educational leader is not cognizant of their influence both within and beyond the Catholic community, and does not purposefully serve the mission and vision of Catholic education, a kind of identity is manifested that does not genuinely represent the lived faith in Catholic schools. To shape and inform one’s Catholic identity, participants affirmed, across a variety of landscapes and in relationship with others, is key to the effectiveness of the Catholic leader’s role to serve the needs of staff, students, and community. As expressed by the participants in this study, Catholic educational leaders must fervently serve and advocate that the diverse spiritual, social, emotion, and academic needs of their students be accommodated within safe, caring, and inclusive learning environments. Equally important is the need to assert the importance of spiritual, religious, and social aspects of Catholic identity in a clear, considerate, and convincing manner. Short of this, stakeholders could very well interpret Catholic education to be a duplicate school system in public education. Advocating for Catholic education means advocating for students and their right to an education that weaves faith and inclusion into the very fabric of school culture.
Catholic and non-Catholic students.

Donlevy (2002), advises that "notwithstanding the number of non-Catholic students, school boards should arguably examine their inclusionary policies from differing perspectives to ensure that they are in accord with Church teaching and the practicalities of the social world within which their schools function. This matter is, then, current and topical to Catholic schools” (p. 102). It has become apparent, as expressed by all participants in this study, that non-Catholic students comprise a significant percentage of the total school population. Why would non-Catholic parents continue to choose Catholic education for their children, when public schools can likewise meet their educational needs? After noting a rise in Catholic baptisms in England and Wales, Rymarz (2016) attributes three reasons for why parents are choosing Catholic schools:

First, it notes the popularity of Catholic schools and the lengths to which parents will go to enrol their children…Second, it seems to be a good illustration of the brand loyalty and how long it is likely to last (from one generation to the next). Third, it is another reminder that the popularity of the schools should not be seen as inevitably deriving from some type of strong religious sensibility. It is not unfair to suggest that parents who have their children baptized to gain admission to a school do not have a compelling or enduring allegiance to the Catholic worldview (p. 42).

Participants in this study shared that they often experienced angst when registering both Catholic and non-Catholic students. The reason both scenarios cause anxiety is that, although a student or their family self-identify as Catholic, this does not ensure they practice Catholicism. This requires the Catholic educational leader to have a broad and
comprehensive understanding of Catholic identity that resonates with a diverse school population. Precisely in this example, the univocal, uniform, and singular notion of Catholic identity does not satisfy. Non-Catholic students and their parents express the desire to have an education based on values, morals, and an understanding of God. This point of intersection reaffirms teachers working with students on common values such as honesty, integrity, and citizenship. The Catholic school extends this learning to Gospel teachings and the life of Christ. Consequently, the Catholic educational leader is obliged to fuse faith and education in a humanizing curriculum and school culture that is of universal appeal. Parents and students often share that they value the spiritual component of Catholic schools as an important component of a wholesome education yet feel ill equipped to provide faith formation for their children and look to the school to take the lead. Pope Francis affirms the essence of what a Catholic school should strive to accomplish:

School is one of the educational environments where one grows by learning how to live, how to become grown-up, mature men and women…Following what Ignatius teaches us, the essential element in school is learning to be magnanimous…this means having a big heart, having a greatness of soul. It means having grand ideals, the desire to achieve great things in response to what God asks of us and, precisely because of this, doing everyday things, all our daily actions, commitments, and meetings with people well. It means doing the little everyday things with a big heart that is open to God and to others. (Francis, 2013, Address of Pope Francis to the students of the Jesuit Schools of Italy and Albania)

While public schools strive to accomplish all that Pope Francis is suggesting, they
do so without God, without prayer to God, and without receiving the grace of God through the sacraments of baptism, reconciliation, first holy communion, and confirmation. The sacraments serve as milestones of faith formation and may serve as markers of commitment to Catholicism. Further, they are explicitly important for distinguishing Catholic from public education. Whereas a Catholic school would assist students in preparation for these sacraments, such would not be the case in a public school. Participants clearly affirmed that nurturing positive relationships with others, placing God as the cornerstone, contributed both to the formation of their own Catholic identity, but also for fulfilling the responsibilities as faith leader in their respective schools. Articulating that Catholic schools are rooted in the primary mission of educating the whole child in a permeated Catholic environment, whether they are Catholic or not, remained at the forefront of a Catholic educational leader’s responsibility. Because of this obligation, informing and shaping their Catholic identity is seemingly of great importance as it transfers to communicating the distinctiveness of Catholic education to the broader community. Parents, for example, when completing the necessary registration documents for the Edmonton Catholic School District sign consent to the following statement:

Notice to Parent or Guardian of Religious Permeation: The Alberta Human Rights Act requires Edmonton Catholic Schools to give notice to a parent or guardian when courses of study, educational programs, institutional materials, instruction or exercises include subject matter that deals primarily and explicitly with religion. The essential purpose of our schools is to fully permeate Catholic theology, philosophy, practices and beliefs, the principles of the Gospel and teachings of the Catholic Church, in all aspects of school life, including in the curriculum of every
subject taught, both in and outside of formal religion classes, celebrations, and exercises. Every course of study and education program, all instructional materials and exercises will at all times include subject matter that deals primarily and explicitly with religion. (ECSD Website, 2017)

This quotation, addresses the need to communicate to the broader community exactly what constitutes Catholic education, ensuring it is in compliance with the Alberta Human Rights Act. Providing consent, also serves to initiate an ongoing relationship between school and parent committed to serving the needs of the child with dignity and respect. Pope Francis, in his World Report on improving Catholic education, acknowledges the importance of inclusivity and strongly affirms the welcome acceptance of non-Catholic students and the importance they have within a diverse and inclusive Catholic school:

Effectively, Catholic schools are attended by many students who are not Christian or do not believe. Catholic educational institutions offer to all an approach to education that is committed to the full development of the whole person. However, they are also called upon to offer, with full respect for the freedom of each person and using the methods appropriate to the scholastic environment, the Christian belief, that is, to present Jesus Christ as the meaning of life, the cosmos and history. Jesus began to proclaim the good news to the ‘Galilee of the people,' a crossroads of people, diverse in terms of race, culture and religion. This context resembles today's world, in certain respects. The profound changes that have led to the ever-wider diffusion of multicultural societies require those who work in the school or university sector to be involved in educational itineraries involving
comparison and dialogue, with a courageous and innovative fidelity that enables Catholic identity to encounter the various ‘souls' of a multicultural society. (2014).

Such comments directly stated by the Pope, however, are rarely discussed at professional development opportunities amongst colleagues as leaders or with teachers and community. If they are of any impact, it is unintentional. There is a multitude of reasons as to why parents choose educating their child in either a Catholic or public school. A host of reason ranging from living with close proximity to the school, specialized programing, high academic standing as determined by standardized testing, to a desire or commitment to faith based education serve as motivating factors to why a parent and student selects a certain school. Participants in this study maintain that while protecting the distinctiveness of Catholic education, they felt confident in being able to serve the needs of all students within a respectful school culture. Barry expresses this by stating:

There can be something seductive in believing that the Catholicity of a school can be reduced to a number...how many Catholic students in a school. I think there is more to that understanding of Catholicity. It isn’t that simple and straightforward. Ultimately the Catholic school leader has to have a rich philosophical understanding of what it means to be a Catholic school. The role entails nurturing a faith community that includes everyone...being distinct and inclusive- you really have to think about it and be intentional.

Sullivan (2001) captures this tension of inclusive and distinctiveness by suggesting that:

It arises from two apparently conflicting imperatives within Catholicism. On the one hand, the mission of the Church is to transmit something distinctive, a
divinely sanctioned message for life…on the other hand, an equally important imperative for Catholicism to be fully inclusive, to be open to all types of people…the gospel to be offered is not only to be addressed to all people…it is …for all people…it also relies on its capacity to embrace the concerns, to meet the needs and to address the perspective of all God’s people, in a way that is open to and inclusive of the diversity of their circumstances and culture…these two imperatives do not sit easily together…this balance is not easy to maintain. At times one imperative may appear to dominate Catholic educational thinking and practice, to the detriment of the other. (pp. 27-28)

Catholic educational leaders in this study articulated their desire to lead Catholic schools that were respectful to the individual needs of each child regardless of whether they were a Catholic or non-Catholic student. Although the initial decision of accepting a student at times proved challenging, possibly stemming from out dated registration practices once accepted, their commitment to serving the needs of the student ranked high on their list of priorities, and they were clear in expressing this expectation to their staff. Where once a tension was felt for accepting non-Catholic students, participants attested to their sense of vocation and ministry, compelling them to welcome all students within their Catholic schools. Inclusivity and distinctness were equally important to the Catholic identity of both their personal and professional faith commitment. The challenge rests in the inability to express to both insiders and outsiders how inclusion and diversity are lived within the walls of a Catholic school for all students. In addition, the problem is compounded by the lack of student voice attesting that Catholic schools are serving their needs in a respectful and nurturing manner. Catholic educational leaders should consider
engaging collaboratively with students and parents to co-create a larger picture of Catholic education that upholds the dignity of all. Be it that the mission of the Church is to welcome all, Catholic schools are obliged to follow suit. Short of this, Catholic schools will continue to be perceived and understood as institutions of rigidity, intolerance, and arrogance. If Catholic educational leaders are to be influential in the vitality and relevance of 21st-century Catholic education, it is of primary importance not only to educate themselves on church documents that outline the mission and vision of Catholic schools as inclusive and distinct but in the ability to fully articulate this to stakeholders. This is challenging given that Catholic educational leaders are not always confident in their understanding of Church social teaching and find it difficult to translate these teachings into everyday context. Continued professional development in faith formation, nurturing relationships with clergy, and finding opportunities to dialogue with colleagues and stakeholders, could serve towards generating a wholesome understanding of how inclusion and diversity are foundational to the mission and vision of Catholic education.

Continued lack of articulation could ultimately compromise Catholic education and directly contribute to its irrelevance: a suffocating silence of demise. In his doctoral dissertation, Davison (2006) advises that Catholic educational leaders must develop a voice to express and articulate their thoughts and reflections in a way that is accessible to others, recommending, “sound theological education and spiritual formation in preparation for faith leadership (given) the context of socio-cultural change” (p. 4).

**Articulation of the Concept of Catholic Identity**

The concept of Catholic identity is complex, as it requires a synthesis and understanding life experiences, Participants stated and restated that Catholic identity is
dynamic and in flux of circumstance thus changing over time. Across a multitude of landscapes Catholic identity shapes, informs, and influences the understanding of faith and how it is embodied through lived action. While participants referenced a singular notion of Catholic identity unique to the individual person, they affirmed opportunity for multiple pathways of expression. Three subthemes resulted that included understanding the singular notion of Catholic identity, moving towards affirming the complexity of Catholic identity serving a variety of expression, and that one’s own charism while unique to the individual, provides overlap to Catholic identities when in relationship with others.

**Singular notion of Catholic identity.**

Searching for a complete definition of Catholic identity, even drawing from four senior Catholic educational leaders, continues to be a daunting and overwhelming undertaking, stemming from a diversity of understanding, based on a vastness of experiences, across a multitude of personal and professional landscapes. Theresa, a Catholic leader responsible for the Catholic formation of principals, assistant principals, and teachers, at the onset of the study revealed, "I don't know what I am going to say. I don't know if I have anything valid to contribute." The inability to express one's Catholic identity proposes a cacophony of confusion amplified by a society where Catholicism is being challenged and Catholic education is being scrutinized. Such a deficit in articulation, participants indicated, is a result of becoming complacent and not engaging in wholesome discourse about Catholic identity. Perceived lack of theological understanding and nervousness surrounding what is the “right answer” hinders meaningful discussion. We are reminded of Charlie who doubted his own ability in
delivering a homily while completing theological studies. Catholic educational leaders often compensate by bringing in expert guest speakers and having members of the church speak during faith formation development. This practice, while seemingly a harmless and possibly fruitful endeavour, does not give opportunity for personal expression and dialogue resulting in rhetoric rather than meaningful discussion. Participants indicated that the conversations held during the course of this study provided rich opportunity for discussing Catholic identity and making sense of their own experiences. Opportunities for rich dialogue contribute greatly to understanding and articulation of Catholic identity and should not be delegated to expert opinion.

In addition, the research question, asking, “What is the lived experience of Catholic educational leaders in relation to shaping, forming, and influencing Catholic identity in 21st century schools?” elicited a broad range of responses from the participants. Repeatedly, family, relationships, educational and professional communities, along with maturity and life experiences, constituted the foundational ingredients for the formation of Catholic identity. Additionally, participants described purposefully seeking a variety of opportunities, which they believed nurtured their faith formation: completing post-secondary coursework, being active volunteers in Church life, and serving the marginalized through social justice projects. Likewise, they expressed how their Catholic identity has changed and developed over time, concluding that it is dynamic and never static; a work in progress. Rossiter (2013) states that:

Identity is fundamentally important for individuals and education, and why it is difficult to analyze, is because its meaning emerges from efforts to answer the fundamental questions: “Who am I?” and “Who are we?” The questions have
simple answers: the individual is a named historical person. And profound ones:
how the individual understands himself/herself may always remain something of a
mystery. (p.4)

Situated within this mystery is the difficulty in articulating Catholic identity to
others in so far as providing a standardized definition, although a multitude of examples
were shared from various stages of their lived experience. Rossiter (2013) explain this
complexity as follows:

Identity can be both a given, physical, unchanging entity while at the same time a
life long process of change. At some psychological level, people may spend all of
their lives reflecting and articulating for themselves partial answers to questions
about their needs, moods, beliefs, purpose, motivations and values. (p. 2)

Rossiter (2013) cites Meijer (1995) to capture the foundation that personal
interpretation of life events:

Identity forging process…this human potential for reflection is more fundamental
than identity, for identity as interpretation is the outcome of reflection. Personal
identity, therefore, is necessarily tentative, to be reflected upon, considered and
revised again and again….the need for continual change and development in
identity is useful for identifying problems that result from defining identity as
fixed….also how personal interpretation of experience can be a valuable
component of identity which allows for change and development. (p. 4)

Participants in this study referenced their experiences in both their personal and
professional life as contributing factors of their faith formation. Seeking out spaces to
engage in meaningful reflection of beliefs, values, and tradition is necessary to avoid
complacency and lack of articulation. Participants articulated that as they gained multiple experiences, serving a variety of communities throughout their career, brought them to new understandings of self-concerning both their role and their faith. Barry speaks explicitly to the importance of interpretation and reflection in his Catholic leadership journey. Not only is the Catholic identity of the leader important, but it is also equally important how it is understood by the self and expressed to others. Because relationships are significant for both the formation and articulation of Catholic identity, understanding the context of interaction becomes a key consideration. Participants agreed that expression of Catholic identity helps to shape, inform, and influence their leadership role, both to themselves and to others. Their leadership style, in turn, an outward expression of their Catholic identity. This is where the intangible becomes tangible and where the invisible God becomes visible; where words become witness. Finding the words proves difficult, perhaps because we are trying to conform to a singular notion of Catholic identity, which we are unable to embody.

Consequentially, in an attempt to honor the diversity of relationships and experiences encountered throughout the years of experience as a Catholic educational leader, participants agreed that expression can take various forms, be it in music, dance, art, and poetry. Barry uses this analogy to illustrate this point:

It’s as a story about the three stone masons. A person walks by, and these three people are hacking away at the stones to try to make the bricks. So the guy asks the first person and asks him what he is doing. He responds that he is making this particular brick. Person goes to the next person and asks and the response he gets is that he is making a wall. Person goes to the last person and asks him what he is
doing figuring that they are all doing the same work. Surprisingly the last person responds, I am building a cathedral.

This analogy expresses the diversity of expression within the role of Catholic educational leadership. While some individuals might articulate the minute detail of the role, others might express a grand completed vision. While all three masons worked on the same task, each was distinct in the articulation of their contribution. Expression of Catholic identity has been problematic for educational leaders to remain as a key focus of their work as they endeavor to juggle the multitude of responsibilities they encounter on a daily basis, and the individual understanding of the lived experience of their role. Perhaps, as Teresa alluded, searching for a complete definition of Catholic identity is futile, as so many variations exist from person to person and experience to experience. It might very well be that stripping Catholic identity to a notion of defined simplicity is counterintuitive to the complexity and multifaceted uniqueness manifested in the diversity of each human person. Like the colors of a kaleidoscope each blending into the other, so too are the strands of experience interweaved in the fabric of Catholic identity.

**Complexity of Catholic identity serves a variety of expression.**

Although participants agreed that there is much literature surrounding Catholic identity, it remains highly problematic in the inability to articulate it to others. This difficulty may result due to the complexity of Catholic identity expressed as a singular entity. Rossiter (2013) suggests, "individuals can be thought of as having multiple component identities which blend to constitute a distinct individual. Each identity (personal, moral, family, spiritual, religious, ethnic, cultural, historical) relates [and interconnects] to some aspect of their lives or to some membership that contributes to a
description of the individual. Each identity is like a lens for viewing the individual" (p. 2). With such complexity in the formation of identity, he suggests, "a narrow, exclusivist view of personal and group identities is at the center of much human conflict" (p. 2). As a result, Catholic identity when described with a definitive set of attributes may not resonate with all individuals. If the expectation is that Catholic identity is uniform and standardized among all people, it becomes contentious when different perspectives are expressed.

Catholic educational leaders carry the burden of responsibility for both their individual faith formation and the faith formation of their school community. Such a responsibility has been bound with stereotypical notions of what Catholic identity is and how it should be expressed. Participants agreed that a plethora of messaging surrounds the phrase Catholic identity that it is taken for granted, from both insiders and outsiders, as understood and accepted, rather than explored for renewed and relevant understanding. It is uncertain whether this hesitancy to honour a diversity of Catholic identities is symptomatic of rigidity in institutional tradition or a reluctance to venture into uncharted waters, or both. While participants did not specifically reference the word “identities” it was well established that the word “identity” was expressed with a great variety of examples within the leadership role ranging from ministry to the imprisoned, attending to conflict resolution with colleagues, praying with students, and serving a diversity of staff needs. Thomas specifically requested teaching in a PDP classroom with the intention of those experiences contributing to his faith formation and sense of Catholic identity. Catholic identity as singular, fixed, and unchanging does not depict the diversity of experiences had by each participant.
McDonough states (2015) that indeed reference to Catholic identity in the singular, “is at best limited unless a plurality of Catholic identities is acknowledged”; he continues, “Moreover, I propose that a social-ecclesial mechanism needs to be established for including and coordinating this plurality in the school” (p. 1). Given that the “Church is a complex entity that cannot be adequately understood exclusively through one model” (McDonough, 2015, p. 3), it is important to recognize that the Catholic identity of Catholic educational leaders is equally complex. McDonough (2015) concludes that, “the ecclesiological question of coordinating multiple identities inevitably becomes a pedagogical question insofar as the school must confront the issues of how to organize itself and teach in light of diverse perspectives” (p. 6). This has direct implication for the Catholic educational leaders who are responsible for honouring diverse perspectives and weaving them into a common mission that serves as the bedrock for nurturing Catholic culture.

As presented in the findings, all participants attested to the diversity of students and teachers within their school and concluded that Catholic leadership entails the ability to nurture the faith journey of all people in the school, taking into consideration that everyone is on a different path. This genuine respect is rooted in the understanding that Catholic identity moves along two continuums: one that is moving toward a common identity and the other driven by individual expression. Referencing the work of Rymarz (2013) where Rymarz explains that a top-down imposition of identity will not likely be wise or possible, and hence a grassroots revival from teachers and the community might be preferred, and Cook (2001), where he instead places much emphasis on the leader’s role as being the architect of culture within a Catholic school, McDonough (2015)
otherwise suggests that “all this discussion is interesting, but remarkably takes place without first defining Catholic culture and identity. So while both authors make insightful contributions to conversations about Catholic schools, they also share a limited conception of Catholic culture and identity in singular terms that does not recognize its diversity” (p. 1).

The notion of a singular identity may imply that there is a right and wrong version of what Catholic identity constitutes. Participants referenced angst concerning the faith formation of their teachers and the future of Catholic education hinging on the importance of maintaining a strong Catholic identity both individually as a Catholic but also collectively as a Catholic school community. It is important to remain mindful of the distinction between faith formation and Catholic identity. While Catholic identity is contingent on faith formation, it would be erroneous to conflate faith formation with Catholic identity exclusively. Short of this, Catholic education as we know it today may very well crumble given the adherence to a single unarticulated notion of Catholic identity. Rymarz (2016), in his most recent book, nudges towards the possibility of multiple Catholic identities by stating, “the reason that many Catholic schools find their identity problematic is that there are so many ways to express it” (p. 103). Arbuckle (2015) suggests that the singular notion of Catholic identity is oppressive to the "stereotyped [who] are excluded from equality with the dominant group. The oppressed group must be submissive and accept its inferior position with patience" (p. 35). Such might be the case if Catholic educational leaders expect a dominant predetermined expressional of Catholic identity as the norm. Within the culture of a school, teachers, students, and parents represent a diverse population with different backgrounds eliciting a
variety of articulation. As a result, understanding Catholic identity from a singular perspective indeed imposes a standardized definition often difficult to understand and challenging to articulate. This could well impede the level of ownership and autonomy experienced by Catholic educational leaders. As expressed by the participants, career aspirations and promotions are closely affiliated with the "company line" and responding to established norms directly influences and facilitates a smoother transition to sought-after leadership positions. Similarly, new teachers, who are working towards their continuous contract designation, are often bound by assumed or unspoken presumptions of what constitutes a good Catholic teacher. In their formative years, participants agreed that faith formation and mentorship are necessary for teachers and staff to understand and develop their Catholic identity. Language communicates expectations, and as such when speaking of Catholic identity, it would be presumed there is one correct version. Reference to Catholic identities allows the latitude for exploration, understanding, and witness to be demonstrated and articulated always mindful that there is opportunity for a variety of expression.

Rossiter (2013) explains, “Personal identity is like a well-established working hypothesis of the self…this understanding of identity acknowledges that external and social interaction are crucial reference points and raw material for identity…living with the stereotypes and values they have absorbed unconsciously [causes]to display an identity by default…no matter what individuals might say about identity…. their life structure is the litmus test of their authenticity” (p.5). This hypothesis of identity is a complex and interwoven network of layered understanding of experiences over a lifetime, not easily captured by a simplistic singular notion. Thus the inability to express what is
not understood or lived, and what is implicitly or explicitly woven and absorbed in the character, philosophy, and ethos of traditional Catholic education culture.

**Charism: The bridge to Catholic identities.**

Everyone has his or her unique gifts and talents that are used to serve the self, the community, and God. Biblical references to charisms may be found in 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 where it states, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone." In Romans 12:6-8, states, “We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.”

Catholic educational leaders must build on the gifts and talents of their staff. The key is allowing all members to discern and develop what Cook (2016) refers to as charism. "The word charism comes from the Greek word for gift or favor. Saint Paul speaks in Scripture about the variety of spiritual gifts that are bestowed upon individuals for the sake of building the kingdom of God on earth. Charisms are typically defined as gifts of the Holy Spirit used to build up the church and world in glory to God. All Christian denominations share a belief in charisms although the vocabulary they use is different…in short, charisms are gifts we give away, not gifts we keep" (p. 5). Charisms may be the common ground where all feel invested in serving Catholic education using their own God given gifts and talents for the service of others.

This understanding serves as both inspiration and direction for Catholic educators
and for all those entrusted to their care. While Catholic educational leaders are expected to develop their gifts and talents, they are likewise responsible for enabling others to do the same. It has been my practice to empower teachers in their faith formation by having them select professional development opportunities that best served their individual needs. Thomas speaks of having teachers with a variety of abilities and specialties in his schools as opportunities to model diversity and acceptance. Theresa used the example of observing her secretary to better understand the needs of her community, acknowledging that everyone experienced and expressed their Catholic identity differently.

Catholic educational leaders, in this study, expressed their dependency on shared memories, diversity of communities, and dedication to serving the needs of students first and foremost as foundational building blocks to their Catholic identity. Under such circumstances, the Catholic educational leader is instrumental in establishing the ethos of the Catholic school and provides opportunity for it, as Wilkin (2014) describes, to be accumulating "spiritual capital…a proportion of each participant's Catholic identity" (p. 165). To this end, Catholic identity serves to construct a mosaic of Catholic identities each uniquely distinct within the diversity of a Catholic school community however, remaining committed to a common core of beliefs, values, and tradition. Wilkin (2014) further explains how "these memories [of experience] have a dynamic and continuing relevance…thanks to a normative dimension that endures through the processes of selective forgetting, sifting and retrospectively inventing" (p. 165). In relation to developing the Catholic ethos of a school, this understanding resonates themes of an ever changing, and dynamic educational and societal landscape, and Catholic educational leaders shaping, informing, and influencing their lived experience of Catholic identity.
within this dynamic framework.

Acknowledging that such an endeavour is not easily achieved alone, Catholic educational leaders soon realize that empowering others to serve using their unique gifts and talents, a spiritual capital is accumulated in a school; i.e., shared ownership of mission and vision. It is here that Catholic identity transforms into Catholic identities because in the authenticity of serving Catholic education with one's unique gifts and talents, precisely there is where the individuality of faith is expressed. Catholic identity becomes Catholic identities, all in communion serving one mission, with multiple pathways of expression. Although not often explicitly expressed, as was the case with participants in in this study, the importance of honoring a diversity of articulation, contributes to a vibrant, relevant, and engaging manifestation of faith formation within a Catholic educational community.

How can these multiple pathways of expression become the spiritual capital where every member of the school community is able to express their faith with authenticity? Charlie, Thomas, and Barry referenced special gifts or talents that connected them to a closer understanding and formation of their faith. Charlie shared his experience of developing his charism in relation to dance:

This was probably one of the most significant things that happened in my life and it was from a Catholic priest. Father Otterson, he was a teacher and a pastor. He had seen me dance in various locations. He said to me, “You know it would be really nice to see you dance at Lit Night and I started laughing.” I said, “You’ve got to be kidding about that.” He said, “No, of course not, but you don’t need to answer right now. Think about it and let me know.” Picture back in those days
part of Irish dancing was wearing a kilt. Do I want to be caught in a kilt? You have got to be kidding because it is just not going to happen… I got to the night good and early because I ‘m thinking I’m going to change into my kilt and I’m going to be back stage, behind the curtains and nobody’s going to see me until it’s time to walk out and get this done. I start to walk onto the stage and there’s a green spotlight that follows me out onto the state. No, I am going to see this through. I can hardly hear the music because of the laughter in the gymnasium and it’s a packed night. I heard the end of the first eight bars knowing it’s time to start.

I could hear my feet echoing off the back wall. The whole gym went quiet. I did the dance. I think it was a jig. I bow and walk off. When I’m leaving that evening there’s a bunch of football players at the front door. I thought okay here it comes. One of the guys turns and looks at me and gives me the thumbs up and says that was really cool. I thought wow it’s accepted. It was a big gamble and it changed my life because I didn’t hide it anymore. I was quite proud of it and I was proud to flaunt it if somebody asked. And I got asked a lot. I was able to thank Monsignor Fee Otterson because it was a really life changing event. I tell my story. Sometimes I get teary eyes. I told it to kids and they got it too. Monsignor Fee Otterson made a huge difference in my life. I had a temper back then. I got into fights and stuff like that. I finally was able to be proud of who I was. I started my own dance school when I was in grade 12 and I did that for 15 years. Maybe that would never have happened if I hadn’t danced that night. It was a life-changing event for me. My faith changed my life.

Having the courage to discern one’s charism is a life long process. Thomas shared
how he understood his charisms to be that of hospitality, trust, and empathy, bringing these to every school he led:

Every year, I would have a welcome back yearly barbecue for the staff. Just another example of how important food is for our culture and how we carry it with us everywhere we go. Even when I changed schools, the staff would come [from my previous schools] because they knew it was held on the third week in August. It crossed from one school to the next. We had so much fun as a staff and became very close, that it had an effect on the students. In the morning, students would come in and the teachers were out and welcoming them. It got so that some of the neighbourhood parents would come to my BBQ with the staff. That was a special culture we had created. When you talk about engaging students, well that staff engaged students. They participated because the staff pulled it out of them and they saw how much fun we had together.

Barry shares his leadership charism as being deeply rooted in the Eucharist. He explained:

I am passionate about the Eucharist. It is the summit of the entire Catholic life. It is the source, the very groundswell of our faith. The Eucharist has framed my understanding of Catholic education. In Confession, we get the gift of forgiveness. In Holy Matrimony, we get the gift of living our vows faithfully. In the gift of Last Rites, we get the gift of strength to see ourselves through an illness. The difference is in the Eucharist. You don’t only get the gift you get the giver of the gift. You get Christ himself. You’re getting the author of the universe. I honestly
think if we could get our teachers more on fire for the Eucharist that would cause revolutionary Catholic schools.

The paradigm shift to Catholic identities will indeed be difficult as terminology is deeply entrenched deeply in the culture of tradition. Consequently, articulation of Catholic identity both to self and others remains problematic and as Arbuckle (2015) suggests, there is "need for refounding, not renewal, of how we train and form members of our institutions in gospel values that are the ultimate foundations of Catholic identities. Renewal confines itself to polishing up formation methods of the past. That is not enough today" (p. xi).

Catholic educational leaders will require the conviction that they are the agents of change towards understanding charism as the bridge to shape, inform, and influence Catholic identities in 21st-century Catholic schools. Inclusive practices should indeed reflect the distinctiveness of how faith is lived out in Catholic schools and how it enables the expression of this to others in word and deed; this is essential if a deep and shared understanding is to emerge.

**Christocentric Education Necessitates Christocentric Leadership**

Within the scope of this study, the landscape of Catholic education in Alberta has been marked with tensions and at times discord stemming from an inability to fully understand and appreciate the common core of Catholic identity. Examining the life of Jesus, as he revealed his identity through the Parables, serves as the ultimate model of leadership. Through the analysis of the data, three subthemes emerged: tension in Catholic leadership and beyond, being in relationship with Christ, and creating a Catholic culture in schools where Christ is the role model for all.
**Tension in Catholic leadership and beyond.**

Christ is the reason for Catholic schools; therefore Christ is the leadership story. It is with deep conviction that the Catholic educational leaders who participated in this study explained time and time again that at the core of Catholic education is Christ. Understanding his message of love, faith, and hope as articulated through the Parables enables the Catholic educational leader to cultivate Catholic school culture. Arbuckle (2015) affirms:

Catholic schools have something to offer those who desire an education that sees the development of the person as a central goal. But this always needs to be seen within the context of Christ as the ultimate goal of human inspiration. This Christological aspect is central to the Church’s and the school’s self-understanding. It is not something extra. Parents who enrol their children in Catholic schools need to understand and support this. If they don’t, they are sending their children to Catholic schools under a misapprehension (p. 37).

In the findings of this study, Catholic educational leaders positioned themselves as the primary faith formation leader in their schools, requiring dedication and time. As such, they felt great tension given the broad range of responsibilities ranging from managerial, instructional, maintenance and public relations. In the document entitled *Catholic Education: Marks of an Excellent Catholic Leader*, written by the Council of Catholic School Superintendents of Alberta (2017), outlines the following Catholic leadership framework:

1. An excellent Catholic Leader embraces the dignity of all as created in the image of God.
2. An excellent Catholic leader advocates for Catholic education with and beyond the school community and makes decisions rooted in Gospel teachings.

3. An excellent Catholic leader intentionally directs and fosters the development of Catholic education through faith permeation.

4. An excellent Catholic leader is called to be a witness and an agent of hope, proclaiming the gospel message to all people, everywhere and at all times.

5. An excellent Catholic leader ensures a communal vision; recognizing that God will be found with and in each other.

It is evident from my findings that participants spoke to each of these descriptors and indicated their importance. Allocating resources, developing respectful and collaborative relationships, supporting the professional development of all staff to nurture faith formation, and mentoring new teachers in the permeation of the faith are daily responsibilities. Alberta Catholic schools continue to grow as a number of new schools are opened and student population grows; this certainly has placed strain on leadership responsibilities. Conducting formative and summative teacher evaluations alone could be considered a full-time commitment. In the past several years, school principals have been required to oversee safety and health regulations in preparation for a COR (Certificate of Recognition) audit. This burden of responsibility and numerous others have made the role of Catholic educational leader a complex and very challenging role. Participants in this study shared that the motivation for endurance rested in their personal conviction of serving their faith referencing a sense of vocation, a calling they answered inspired by the
Holy Spirit. Had the role been viewed strictly as a profession, the sense of commitment, resilience, and purpose might very well have eroded.

**In relationship with Christ.**

Participants, drawing from the work of Nichols (2009), articulated that they were "people committed to the inspiration and demands of faith and seeking to put them into practice in all the substantive life choices that they make" (p. 60).

Looking to Christ as the example for leadership was elicited multiple times by all participants. They were committed to living out the gospel values and strove to give witness to their faith, encompassing both personal and professional life. All participants demonstrated discernment in decision-making in their comments, whether considering an administrative position, deciding to pursue religious studies, beginning a new job outside of Catholic education, or seeking additional experience teaching high-risk students in a Positive Transitions Program. Such decisions, though seemingly insignificant, were the touchstones in the formative journey of their Catholic identity. Participants identified God as being ever present in their life. Sultmann and Brown (2016) refer to this as "the principle of sacramentality (which) entails a belief that God's presence and grace are manifested through the ordinary events of life…our awareness of the presence of God in the background and the foreground of life" (p. 75).

Through this heightened awareness of God's presence, Catholic educational leaders are able to lead their school community in an intentional manner modeling Gospel values. Barry states that the lived reality of schools contributes to the constant tension between what is intended and what is reality:
Jesus calls us to something greater. We are called to not just accommodate the culture, but also challenge the culture. There is a tension within the culture. I don’t think that this can be understated, the culture of busyness is that our faith requires us to slow down, that Christ and God are sometimes known in the stillness and in the quiet. Sometimes we can’t hear the voice of God because we’re going a mile a minute, our brains are going a mile a minute, and we’re moving too fast. How do we make our schools slow down, so that they’re not going at a super human pace that is out of sync with really what should be a more human pace a Catholic school should be at. There is a tension between the pace our world moves and the pace at which God is calling us. This tension is inhibitive to shaping and informing a Catholic educational leader’s identity.

Fincham (2010) addresses the tension as referenced by Barry, expanding on these views, "in conserving the challenges that headteachers in Catholic schools face, the writer concludes that it seems they encounter significant and increasing tensions in attempting to fulfill the faith mission of the Catholic Church within prevailing secular culture and a competitive education environment" (pg.64).

Participants felt it was incumbent on their leadership role to create a school culture where Christ is central to its purpose, and this is increasingly necessary within a culture that sometimes places importance exclusively on standards of success measurable by money, power, and status. Rymarz (2016) states this importance, writing that "the primary goal of a Catholic school is the development of the human person within the context of a deepening relationship with Christ…the Catholic school must seek ways to animate and
sustain this vital relationship with Christ…not in a didactic fashion, by inviting into a genuine dialogue and exchange" (p. 17).

Although such aspirations are noble, remaining are the countless duties demanded of Catholic educational leaders. Barry shares this very poignant example of how he established the theme of light and rock as his school opening theme. He believes that as a Catholic educational leader, it is important to bring the everyday work to a spiritual level that others can identify with.

I think of two symbols. The first is light. It is very evocative and for me it symbolizes God, just in terms of the light dispels the darkness. God dispels our darkness and then the second being the rock. I think it was over 142 times that the word rock is mentioned in the scripture and it’s often referred to as God or the rock of our faith. So I will build on this for our new school year and the light of God will guide us as we go forth. So our theme for the next school year, as a division, is light for the way. The rocks build the path or the trail and the light guides us. We can all identify with moments of light that we have experienced in our own personal journey. I help guide them and just by doing it I am signalling that is important. I am hoping it will have the ripple effect.

If indeed Catholic educational leaders are to remain authentic to their ministry and vocation, the light of Christ will serve to illuminate the path of serving the mission and vision of Catholic education. Christ, our light, permeates the Catholic culture in all places, at all times, and serves as the model for leadership. Without reserve, participants in this study understood their duty as Catholic educational leader to help all members of the school community feel empowered and have voice expressing abstract ideas of Catholic
identity into concrete examples of witness. Thus the light of Christ serves as a reminder of their obligation to minister the faith within the role as Catholic educational leader always striving to inform, shape, and influence their Catholic identity.

**Catholic culture of witness.**

Catholic educational leaders in this study asserted and reiterated the importance of witness in their leadership journey. Expression of Catholic identity is important to verbalize and also to act upon; Barry expands, “Where there is meaning there is action…the most meaningful symbol of our faith is our own witness.” Schutloffel (2013) concurs stating that “coherence between a leader’s beliefs and actions create credibility within a school community and fosters its Catholic identity” (p. 82). Coherence between what is said and what is done is necessary to build both integrity and stability. Tensions arise when Catholic educational leaders do one thing but say another or vice versa. This lack of predictability and consistence does not support healthy relationships within a faith community and with other communities.

Participants in this study suggested that knowing Christ in relationship, looking to Christ in prayer, and walking with Christ in witness, were three essential practices for Catholic educational leaders. Teresa is mindful of the words written by St. Vincent Pallotti, "Remember that the Christian life is one of action; not of speech and daydreams. Let there be few words and many deeds, and let them be done well.”

Thus, the need for Catholic educational leaders to be witnesses of the Catholic faith remains steadfast to credible leadership. Rymarz (2016) attests this by stating, "authenticity is closely tied to the human community associated with Catholic schools…the need for Catholic schools to point to a critical mass of highly committed
members who can act not merely as cultural participants but as cultural animators” (p. 113).

If Catholic education is to fulfill its evangelizing mission, teachers and especially leaders must bring the life of Christ to lived action that is in alignment with the mission and vision of Catholic education. When the teachings of Christ are embodied in the school culture, there is opportunity for all to walk the path of faith celebrating and honouring the diversity of all members. Falling short of this, Catholic educational leaders agreed with the analogy presented by Rymarz (2016) where he states, "unless we truly believe and practice our faith, Catholic culture is just a dead skin of nostalgia and comfortable habits" (p.119).

Catholic educational leaders, who are not only ignited with the passion of faith but are also willing to give witness to their faith within their own leadership role, will serve to sustain and nurture the culture of Catholic education. Catholic educational leaders must indeed be catalysts for articulating the distinctiveness of Catholic education rooted in Christ. As paraphrased from the document The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium, the primary goal of a Catholic school is the development of the human person within the context of a deepening relationship with Christ. Christ is the reason for Catholic schools.
Chapter 6: Implications of the Study

*When we deny our stories, they define us. When we own our stories, we get to write the end.*
(Brene Brown)

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study has been to contribute to the scholarly knowledge of what is the lived experience of Catholic education leaders in relation to shaping, informing, and influencing Catholic identity in 21st century schools. Acknowledging that the challenges facing Catholic education are at the forefront of public discourse prompts the importance for articulating their distinctive mission and vision “in a globalized, post-modern world that is characterized by moral relativism, secularism and materialism (poses) considerable challenges…educational scholarship and literature…still remains underdeveloped. There have been few studies…from the perspective of leaders in Catholic schools” (Fincham, 2010, p.64). The purpose and intent of this study is to contribute to the scholarly work on Catholic educational leadership through the narrative experiences shared by Theresa, Charlie, Thomas, and Barry. Alongside their reflections, I weave my own experiences and how I have come to understand, write and rewrite my own Catholic leadership story. Narrative inquiry as methodology, based on its epistemological and ontological underpinnings, “implies that experiences are continuously interactive, resulting in changes in both people and the contexts in which they interact. It is through experience that people’s lives are composed and recomposed in relation with others who are also living storied lives. It is through story that people are able to make sense of their existence” (Clandinin, Huber, & Murphy, 2011, p. 576). As noted by Heck (2010), “the strength of narrative lies in its ability to embrace the
complexity and paradox of professional practice and to reveal the tacit knowledge many [Catholic educational leaders] hold...giving voice to their own experience” (p. 197).

To both insiders and outsiders of Catholic education, this study might illuminate a better understanding of how Catholic leadership is lived authentically within Catholic schools; striving and attending to the articulation of their spiritual mission. “Because the leaders play a critical role in establishing a strong Catholic communal sense in schools, it is worth looking at how these leaders implement strategies and programs designed to cultivate this special atmosphere” (Rymarz, 2016, p. 19). Theresa, Charlie, Thomas, and Barry speak to their understanding of Catholic educational leadership, hoping that it will serve as a catalyst and inspiration for others, informing decisions and actions, for what proves to be a very complex, distinct, and dynamic role. My journey of faith and leadership has proven a rollercoaster of life events. Experiences shared in dialogue with participants has provided me the opportunity to further analyze Catholic identity across personal and professional landscapes. Fr. Jim and Sr. Annata, both formative and inspiration in my leadership journey, have grounded me in the importance of faith expressed in simplicity and sincerity. In writing this dissertation and conducting this research, I have found my voice, alongside my participants, of how my Catholic educational leadership has evolved over time, and across multiple landscapes. In retrospect, I have been writing this dissertation my entire life, never realizing the full intent of experiences or the enormous impact others have had on my leadership journey. My relationships with the two individuals who have been instrumental in my understanding of faith in life and leadership, Fr. Jim Corrigan and Sr. Annata Brockman, have influenced not only who I am in my present circumstances, but have long lasting
impact in how I will navigate future experiences. I have come to understand these relationships within the three-dimensional inquiry space of narrative inquiry whereby; stories to live by continue to form my understanding of self through experience.

**Find Your Story in the Midst of Chaos**

Bibby and Reid (2016) provide hope for Catholicism in Canada. They report:

Media reports in recent decades…have offered at best a confusing picture of the status of Catholicism in Canada…Faced with a cacophony of mixed signals and contradictory reports, Reg (co-author) and I decided to go straight to Catholics (sample of over 3,000 people) to get a more direct reading that would help provide insight into current trends and future directions. Contrary to dominant views among social scientists that religion has been experiencing a declining role in contemporary societies, we have found precisely the opposite to be the case in Canada when it comes to Catholics. Indeed, globalization and immigration have been bringing to our shores millions of people whose identities are firmly fixed by religious beliefs and practices. Surprisingly, the Catholic Church in Canada is benefiting enormously from developments in the postmodern world that experts had predicted would be its nemesis…Catholic culture, along with beliefs, practices and the vital role of faith in life’s key events…serve to unite the 13 million Canadians who define themselves as Catholic. Our research points to considerable vitality and fertile ground for creating vibrant Christian communities in the new millennium (p.13).

While Bibby and Reid (2016) provide an optimistic outlook on Catholicism, other sociological studies recognize the tensions that religious persons feel in Canadian society
that better support the lived reality of participants in this study. Thiessen (2015) conducted a study drawing on ninety interviews with individuals from Calgary and Alberta to “address three questions related to Christian beliefs and practices, with a particular focus on church attendance” (p. 4). The purpose of the study was to provide an in-depth window into the lived experience of ordinary people within the context of their everyday life (Thiessen, 2015, p. 4). Thiessen (2015) noted an increasing trend in people “sometimes elevate[ing] their personal beliefs and practices over their church or pastor or religious tradition (p.63). This, Thiessen (2015) summarized:

Largely has to do with being embedded in a Canadian narrative that prizes individualism, choice, and tolerance amidst the cacophony of diverse perspectives around. This social context is magnified in a technologically advanced and global age where individuals actively construct and express the “self,” encountering multiple ways of “being” and “doing” in the process. (p. 63)

Sociological studies provide contextual information valuable to Catholic educational leaders serving within a diverse school culture. Thiessen (2015) recognizes that “for some people their connection to God is enhanced because they are surrounded by others who share the basic belief in God” (p. 79). What is interesting to note is that participants in this study aligned with Theissen’s study that indicated, “their spiritual search is always evolving, but they are comfortable with this approach…and is right for me in the space that I’m in right now” (p. 91). According to Thiessen (2015) this changing narrative “contributes to more people declaring today that they have no religion. This gradual openness in society to relatively irreligious individuals is likely a function of widespread
pluralism and diversity found in many late modern democratic societies, especially in Canada, where a single sacred canopy no longer exists” (p. 97).

The challenge for Catholic education leaders is to find voice and purpose in a world that is in constant change and turmoil. Barron firmly asserts that hostility towards the Church, which in some quarters is seen as being antiquated and out-dated to new societal norms, is on the rise, with Catholics themselves taking a quiet approach to defending their faith. Barron, at a recent conference on “Catholic Thought and Human Flourishing” suggests that first we:

Must identify the problems with the mainstream culture – an excessive individualism, a flawed notion of freedom, and the privatization of religion…the common good remains unexplored and unarticulated and thus we tend to lose our…identity and a shared sense of moral direction. (June 2016)

The publicly funded Catholic school system is certainly being challenged not only with regard to its identity, but also, its relevance. Catholic educational leaders have a vested interest not only in articulating the value of Catholic education, but in doing so in the public realm so as to demonstrate its value and its distinct contribution to society.

Articulation of Catholic identity is indeed difficult and many find it easy to express it as a feeling, but find it challenging to put into words. This continues to be a stumbling block and barrier with the outside culture that does not have a comprehensive perspective of what Catholic education entails. Communication and collaboration between Catholic and non-Catholics will posit challenges if there is an unwillingness to serve the common good and allow for dialogues that can be mutually beneficial. In addition, we come to realize that a shared understanding and acceptance of diversity is
needed. Catholic educational leaders must engage in meaningful dialogue and communicate clearly that Catholic education is welcoming to all, respectful of diversity, and inclusive of all. Consequentially, relationships underpin Catholic education and it is of critical importance to extend the hand of collegiality with an ever-changing culture.

**Catholic Education: Bridging the Past, Present and Future**

Pope Francis in his proposal for improving Catholic education reiterated the need for Catholic academic institutions to avoid isolating themselves from the world and instead to “know how to enter, with courage, into the Areopagus of contemporary cultures and to initiate dialogue, aware of the gift they are able to offer to all” (Francis, Pope Francis offers three proposals for improving Catholic education, 2014). Wilkin (2014) commented:

Translating the Catholic tradition for young people is a central challenge for Catholic educators. What emerges from the research is that Catholic head teachers are at a threshold where the tradition of the Church meets the culture of contemporary youth. In the process of translating, Catholic head teachers are inevitably engaged in interpretation, trying to fuse the past and the present in ways which are of necessity both creative and pragmatic, drawing on their own spiritual capital to ensure that the Church maintains its links with young people. (p. 164)

The need for young people to find ways of making meaning in their lives and to develop an authentic sense of self is fundamental to their moral and spiritual wellbeing. Catholic schools play a critical role in merging the relevance of faith within the lived context and social experiences of lived experience. Rossiter (2013) explains:
In a changing social, economic and familial landscape, most of the support networks for meaning and identity that functioned for past generations no longer have the same plausibility and force. For many young people, the beliefs about life’s meaning drawn from religious convictions and from the Church do not seem to have the same cogency they apparently had in the past. (p. 1)

The implications for Catholic educational leaders is the need to discover relevant strategies that will resonate with young people in their search for meaning, values and identity by making the Catholic story their story, understood by their life experiences and relevant to their formation of Catholic identity. Through teachers, stakeholders, insiders and outsiders of Catholic education, it is hoped that this study provides a helpful lens to better understand how Catholic schools contribute to the ever-changing educational landscape. It is certainly in the culture of the school, as nurtured by the Catholic educational leader alongside teachers and parents, where students are able to grow in their faith and in their understanding of self in relation with others. Catholic education serves as the bridge between church, home, school, community, and world. Such coherence contributes to a students’ feel of belonging and understanding in relation to their Catholic identity. Just as Catholic educational leaders expressed struggling with their own understanding of Catholic identity, so do teachers, parents, and students. Jesus shows us that we are not alone. It is in the message of Christ that we find each other in friendship and faith.

Sultmann and Brown (2016) explain, “people are always in need of God’s grace but, at the same time with God’s help, can make a positive contribution towards personal and communal welfare…towards students and inclusive of behaviours that honour
uniqueness, acknowledge dignity, develop gifts, observe rights and build relationships” (p. 75). Honouring the past, celebrating the present, and shaping the future, will provide a coherent understanding of Catholic identity, in relationship with a 21st century learning landscape, contributing to a coherent ‘story to live by.’

**Catholic Leadership: A Vocation of Charism, Relationship, and Witness**

The culture of a Catholic school exemplifies the heartbeat of values and tradition that mark its identity to both self and others. Creating a Catholic culture, while seemingly abstract, remains one of the primary responsibilities of Catholic educational leaders. Given the challenges presented for Catholic education within the context of an increasingly secular society, the Catholic school must find ways in which to express its distinct and unique contributions. Of equal importance remains the understanding that it is within a Catholic culture that “people construct identities through their talk and interactions with others” (Johnson, 2009, p. 270). The Catholic educational leader carries authority not only in financial, administrative, or pedagogical issues, but also in the faith formation of the school community, especially teachers and students. Alongside stakeholders, Catholic educational leaders give witness to the faith explicitly through example. Short of this, the Catholic school remains a diluted entity in the midst of educational choice.

The Catholic educational leader, given the complexity of the role and the multitude of expectations, is able to articulate their Catholic identity when they are able to differentiate between vocation and profession. Buijs (2005) stipulates that, “whether we think of (leadership) as a profession or think of it as a vocation does make a difference in how we deal with students, what we do in the classroom and beyond, how we interact
with colleagues, what commitments we are willing to make, what expectations can be reasonably imposed, what career goals we might set, by what standards we should measure success, and how we view our relationships” (p. 327). With increased levels of accountability and transparency, the role of Catholic educational leader becomes a visible and outward sign of what constitutes Catholic identity. Many times, as a Catholic educational leader when decisions are not made to everyone’s satisfaction, the verbal lashing often becomes, “and you call yourself Catholic?” I have experienced this in many situations ranging from switching a student from one homeroom to another, timetabling teaching assignments, and allocating professional development monies. Some situations are “messy” and it becomes problematic when the issue defaults to being “Catholic” and not leading in accordance to every person’s notion of how that should be demonstrated.

**Final Words**

Within this research text is embedded the leadership stories of Teresa, Charlie, Thomas, Barry, and myself. Together we embarked on an inquiry intended to illuminate how the lived experience of Catholic educational shapes, informs, and influences the conceptual formation of Catholic identity in 21st century schools. Using narrative as our methodology, we remained committed to relational research where “we metaphorically lay(ed) our stories alongside another’s, seeking resonances and reverberations that help us imagine who we might become” (Clandinin & Raymond, 2006, p. 103). Throughout the study, moments of vulnerability, fear, commitment, helplessness, and empowerment were expressed within the research relationship. During the discussions, our stories allowed us to enter into each other’s world of Catholic leadership and the understanding of life experiences shaped and reshaped our understanding of Catholic identity. In essence, we
were knitting a story to live by, in relationship with each other, for the common purpose of understanding Catholic educational leadership.

As Catholic educational leaders, we remain committed to the words of Saint Teresa of Avila, “Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes with which Christ looks out his compassion to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now.” Embarking on this journey four years ago, I never imagined my travels, the individuals I would meet along the way, and the reaffirmation that God has been the author of my life each and every day. Inspired by the late Sr. Annata Brockman to love tenderly, act justly, and walk humbly with our Lord, Catholic educational leaders are implored to serve Catholic education in the 21st century articulating their Catholic identity by honoring their life experiences. Likewise Fr. Jim Corrigan’s, life example serves as a model of witnessing and answering the call of the Holy Spirit. It is the hope of this study to ignite the passion of faith in Catholic educational leaders to serve authentically the call of their vocation to be the light of Christ.
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Appendix 1: Sample Focus Questions

1. What does Catholic identity mean to you? How would you explain it to others? Can you share an example that exemplifies your Catholic identity?

2. What are typical activities and roles that you engage in as a leader in a Catholic school? How do you think this is the same/different from the role of a school leader in public schools?

3. What is the expected form of Catholic identity that is implied you should demonstrate as a Catholic leader? How does this influence your role as a leader and how do you find yourself acting as a Catholic educational leader?

4. Do you have any examples of how a leader manifests Catholic identity in a school community?

5. How has your faith formation been influenced by life experiences and what impact has this had on your Catholic leadership of a learning community?

6. What life experiences have influenced and shaped how you as a Catholic educational leader understand and enact your role?

7. What barriers have you experienced as a Catholic educational leader that have hindered you from being able to align your faith to your role? Can you give an example?

8. Is there a sort of reciprocal relationship between how Catholic identities shape Catholic leadership but also how Catholic leadership shapes Catholic identity? Is there a personal story you might be able to share to illustrate this?
9. Can you think of a story about Jesus that speaks to your example of realizing Catholic identity?

10. As a Catholic educational leader, what are some memorable stories of working with students, parents or colleagues that highlight the Catholic principles of how to be that you live by? How do these Catholic principles emerge in your leadership role?
## Appendix 2: Participants

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<tr>
<th>Participant One</th>
<th>Seminary Education including Bachelor, Master, and Ph.D.</th>
<th>Teacher Principal Superintendent</th>
<th>Experience in three Catholic School Districts</th>
<th>Experience working in private Catholic schools</th>
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<th>Participant Two</th>
<th>Bachelor and Master of Education in Religious Studies</th>
<th>Teacher Principal Assistant Superintendent in Human Resources</th>
<th>Experience in two Catholic School Districts</th>
<th>Ukrainian Catholic Rite</th>
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<tr>
<th>Participant Three</th>
<th>Bachelor and Master of Education in Religious Studies</th>
<th>Teacher Principal Assistant Superintendent responsible for leadership formation</th>
<th>Experience in two Catholic School Districts</th>
<th>Experience working with First Nation, Metis and Inuit school communities</th>
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<tr>
<th>Participant Three</th>
<th>Bachelor of Education</th>
<th>Teacher Principal District Principal in charge of principal and assistant principal formation</th>
<th>Experience working with one Catholic school district</th>
<th>Experience working with affluent school communities</th>
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In keeping with Narrative Inquiry methodology my stories will be composed alongside those of my participants. Also, it is important to note that all participants work throughout different Catholic school districts in Alberta: none work in the District in which I am employed.