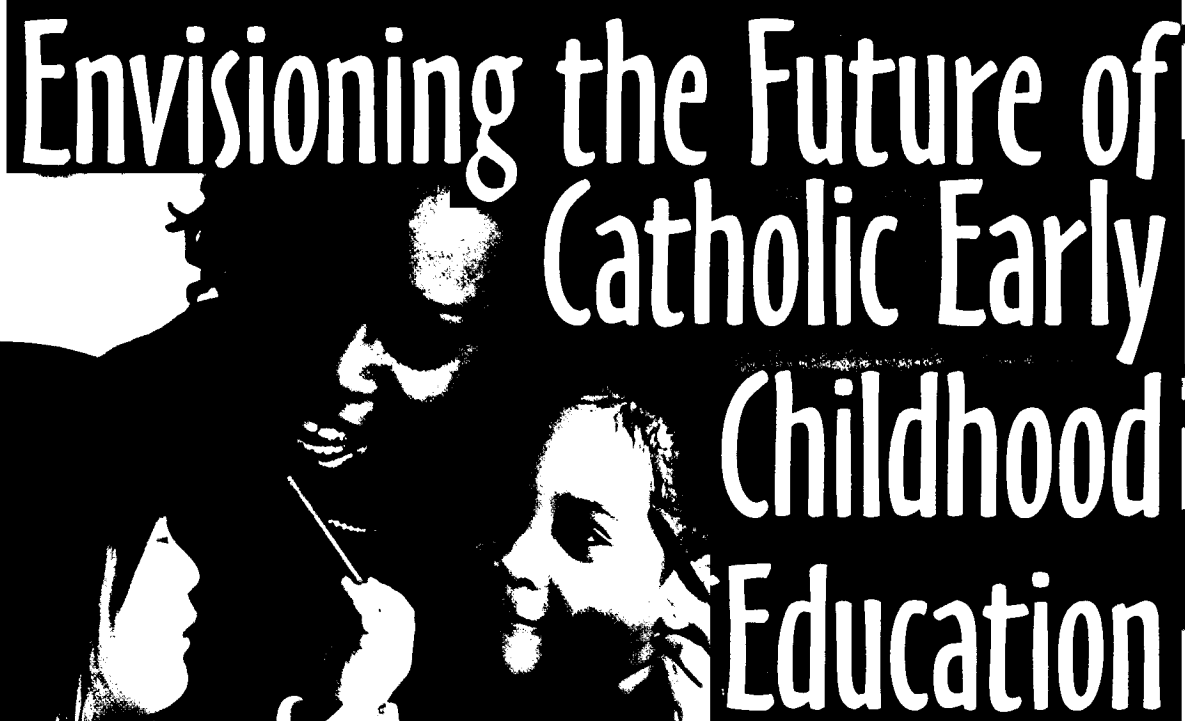


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Envisioning the Future of Catholic Early Childhood Education

Martin Scanlan

Marquette University, martin.scanlan@marquette.edu



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Schools Play an Important Role in Providing Quality Early Childhood Education to Traditionally Marginalized Children

Martin Scanlan

A hallmark of education is the conviction that parents are the primary educators of their children. Elementary and secondary Catholic school staffs recognize that while schools are vital, what they provide is secondary to what happens in the family.

However, an important corollary to this frequently is ignored: the importance of early childhood education. Formal early childhood education is a vital component to long-term success in academics and in life. This is especially the case for children placed at risk by poverty, race and ethnicity, home language and disability. Catholic schools rightly have affirmed the role of parents and caregivers, but often have failed to recognize the important role that our schools can play in providing quality early childhood education to traditionally marginalized children.

Three panelists at the 2006 NCEA convention in Atlanta provided powerful examples of how Catholic early childhood programs can better meet this need. This article presents an

overview of three programs, summarizes key lessons for fellow Catholic school leaders and invites Catholic school practitioners to envision a bold future for Catholic early childhood education.

Three Exemplars of Catholic Early Childhood Education

Cardinal Bernardin Early Childhood Center

The Cardinal Bernardin Early Childhood Center (CBECC) is a regional archdiocesan school in Chicago offering a variety of educational opportunities for infants, toddlers and children up to 9 years old in both Montessori and regular classrooms. By opening two campuses in 1998 in the shells of former Catholic elementary schools, the school made a radical commitment to fostering a diverse student body from its inception. The promotional materials on the school's Web page describe this commitment:



"The leaders of these centers harbor no illusions that they have struck a magic formula and 'figured out' Catholic early childhood education. Instead, they have committed themselves to the process."

No child is turned away. We provide financial assistance for those who are unable to afford tuition and support the inclusion of children with special needs. In fact, our students are a very culturally and economically diverse group of children, and our educational programs serve to support the rich cultural, ethnic and economic diversity of our students and families.

Augmenting tuition revenues with grants and private donations, CBECC is able to open its doors to students whose families cannot afford tuition. Through alliances with a local nonprofit organization as well as public schools, CBECC is able to provide both service delivery and staff training so that students with a wide range of disabilities as well as linguistic home lives are included in the school community.

The philosophy of the school, which emphasizes working closely with families, recognizes that all children have "special needs," regardless of whether these are formally labeled (e.g., autism or Down syndrome) or just circumstances that challenge children (e.g., dealing with the death of a parent). In short, CBECC provides quality early childhood services to children and their families in the spirit of Cardinal Bernardin, who stated: "Inclusion begins in our hearts. It begins with affirmation. We should open our hearts to one another and recognize the strengths of every person.... When we open our hearts and our community to the gifts each person brings, we are all strengthened."

St. Mary's Child Center

St. Mary's Child Center (SMCC) in Indianapolis serves nearly 200 students from ages 3 to 5. The center was selected as a SPICE (Selected Programs for Improving Catholic Education) model program in 2004, for helping young children who are at great risk for a wide range of social, emotional, economic and environ-

mental problems and whose needs are not being met adequately by any other private or public service. As an early intervention center, SMCC serves children who have suffered from poverty, neglect, abuse, violence, separation from parents and learning disabilities. The vast majority of the families in SMCC would not otherwise be able to provide their children with a quality early childhood education. The school provides personalized transportation for 90 percent of the children and meals for all students. Extensive fundraising allows this to be offered to families for as little as \$2 a week.

Villa Montessori Center

The final exemplar of an early childhood center including traditionally marginalized children is the Villa Montessori Center (VMC) in Cleveland, Ohio. The 50 students at VMC come from diverse cultural backgrounds, including Asian, African American, Indian and middle-European immigrants (e.g., Polish, Czech and Slovak). VMC opened in 1995 and is situated in a renovated bank building in a high-poverty neighborhood of Cleveland. The space, centrally located on a bus route in the heart of the community, includes both a large classroom and a large motor room for integrated body learning.

At VMC the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd religion program compliments the Montessori Program and centers on the message that Jesus the Good Shepherd loves us, protects us and leads us to God. In addition, children are taught to resolve conflicts in an appropriate man-

ner through a program called "Peace Works." Essentially, VMC brings quality early childhood programming to families in an impoverished community.

Lessons from These Programs

Three key lessons emerge from these centers: (a) faith builds capacity, (b) expect unexpected allies, and (c) the journey is the reward. In each of these centers, the capacity to serve traditionally marginalized children is built first on faith. Make no mistake—each center must balance its budget and demonstrate fiscal responsibility as well as educational quality. Yet the faith of the educational leaders in each of these school communities literally builds the capacity of each school.

Sister Barbara Jean (Bee Jay) Ciszek, of the Sisters of St. Joseph, epitomizes this. Describing how she responded to the first family who came to CBECC with a child with a

Martin Scanlan, Ph.D., spent 10 years as a teacher and administrator in Catholic elementary schools in the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., and the Dioceses of Oakland, California, and Madison, Wisconsin. He earned his Ph.D. in educational leadership and policy analysis from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in December 2005 and began teaching as an assistant professor at Marquette University's Department of Educational Policy and Leadership this fall. His dissertation, which was a multicase study of Catholic elementary schools serving traditionally marginalized students, was recognized as the Outstanding Dissertation of the Year by the Educational Administration Division of the American Educational Research Association (martin.scanlan@marquette.edu).

"We who are educators on the local level have a mission to inspire our parish and community leaders to see the acts of the future in their decisions of today."

disability, Sister Bee Jay related, "I said yes, then I figured it out later." She recounted that CBECC became a school inclusive to students with disabilities not by first lining up all the needed resources to provide supports but rather by believing first, and then finding out how to act. The faith of the leader continually allows each of these centers to expand its capacity.

Expecting unexpected allies is a second key lesson from these three centers. Connie Sherman, director of SMCC, described one of the key donors at the school as a local business leader with no formal connection with the Catholic Church or Catholic schools. He had great compassion for children and their needs, was impressed by the work that SMCC was accomplishing in the city and became involved.

Sister Marie Veres of the Sisters of Humility of Mary, who founded VMC in 1995, found an ally in a local bank that agreed to lease her space on their ground floor to be used for the center. Thus, whether in individuals or agencies, these leaders consistently find support for their children in new and frequently unexpected corners.

Finally, these three centers demonstrate that the journey is the reward. No center starts out as a complete unit, but rather all are works in progress. Although SMCC now has two sites, it began in some vacant rooms in a local Catholic school. While CBECC now serves students from infancy through age 9, it began by serving only 3- and 4-year-olds and expanded its age range up and down as it grew.

These centers do not serve simply as feeders for K-8 Catholic schools,

For Additional Information

To learn more about the organizations described in this article, visit these Web sites:

Cardinal Bernardin Early Childhood Center: www.cbccc.nonprofitoffice.com

St. Mary's Child Care Center: www.stmaryschildcenter.org

Villa Montessori Center: www.villamontessoricenter.org

For more information about SPICE (Selected Programs for Improving Catholic Education) visit:

www.ncea.org/services/spice.asp.

Early Childhood Education

Conversations in Excellence 2004



Edited by
Timothy W. Dwyer
Regina M. Haney
Joseph M. O'Keefe, SJ

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network for Catholic schools



"Early Childhood Education: Conversations in Excellence 2004"

A book containing keynotes, descriptions and contact information for 10 model early childhood programs serving youth ages 3 to 8 is available from NCEA Member Service Center (ADM-38-1337; \$17 members; \$26 nonmembers).

but instead provide vital services in their own right. Ms. Sherman explained that she has to remind people constantly that an investment in quality early childhood education pays enormous dividends by reducing barriers to academic achievement.

"Positive outcomes for children involved in a high-quality early childhood education are significant," she said. "These include higher IQ scores, achievement levels and graduation rates. These children are less likely to be retained in school, go into special education or be incarcerated."

Sister Marie places her ministry at VMC in the context of the ongoing call to be a peacemaker, saying, "The obligation and responsibility of leaders is to see education as a wonderful tool for the betterment of the world."

The leaders of these centers harbor no illusions that they have struck a magic formula and "figured out" Catholic early childhood education. Instead, they have committed themselves to the process.

Envisioning the Future

Research shows that high-quality early childhood programs have important short- and long-term effects

for young children, especially children in poverty and those with special educational needs (Carnegie Task Force on Learning in the Primary Grades, 1996; Gruendel, Oliveira, & Geballe, 2003; Kauerz, 2001; National Association for the Education of Young Children & National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2003; Schwartz, 2001; Schweinhardt, 2005; Weikart, 1996, 2000). Increasingly the Catholic education community has been pursuing ways to create these programs within their schools and dioceses (Dwyer, Haney and O'Keefe, 2004; Kealey, 2001; Killoran, 2002).

Diocesan support and school leadership is critical to initiate and institutionalize early childhood programs with a clear Catholic identity. Innovative fundraising and resource management is essential if such programs are going to meet the call of the bishops to be available, affordable and accessible (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005).

Crafting programs that blend both a strong Catholic identity and an unambiguous commitment to serving children on the margins requires extraordinary vision. The three centers described in this article can help cul-

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tivate such a vision for the future of Catholic early childhood education. These centers serve children who traditionally have been marginalized by poverty, language, race and ethnicity and disability. They recognize that families play a key role in the lives of all children and support families in this work. They provide a powerful witness to lessons of allowing faith to build capacity, expecting allies in unexpected places and committing to the journey.

These examples, however, are only the beginning of the conversation. As Sister Marie put it, "We who are educators on the local level have a mission to inspire our parish and community leaders to see the acts of the future in their decisions of today." Many Catholic schools and parishes around the nation can provide valuable contributions to this vision. Does your school or parish community provide quality early childhood education to students who are traditionally on the margins? Do your experiences resonate with the

lessons of the three centers presented here, or are there other lessons that your experiences contribute? In short, how can you contribute to deepening the dialogue in the Catholic community toward envisioning the future of Catholic early childhood education?

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