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Lost Classroom, Lost Community: Catholic Schools' Importance in Urban America (Book Review)

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BOOK REVIEW

Lost Classroom, Lost Community: Catholic Schools' Importance in Urban America

Margaret F. Brinig and Nichole Stelle Garnett
Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014
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In their book, *Lost Classroom, Lost Community: Catholic Schools' Importance in Urban America*, authors Margaret Brinig and Nicole Garnett argue that closures of Catholic schools in the urban centers of Chicago and Philadelphia diminish the social capital of their respective communities. Central to their thesis, they draw upon definitions of social capital articulated by Robert Putnam (2000) and Mark Granovetter (1973) to explain that "social networks… make urban neighborhoods function smoothly—the connections that draw residents together and enable them to suppress evils like crime and disorder" (Brinig & Garnett, 2014, pp. 114-115). Their study aims to demonstrate a relationship between urban Catholic schools and the community context. Interestingly, in order to highlight the relationship between Catholic schools and social capital, the authors focus their attention on what occurs *outside* the urban Catholic school *after* the school closes rather than what occurs *inside* the Catholic school to raise levels of social trust or capital in a neighborhood. In this manner, the book focuses less on Catholic education as a context, but more on the data used to measure social capital in the neighborhoods Catholic schools leave behind when they close.

The book begins with a brief historical account of Catholic schools in the US, including the suburbanization of America and its impact on Catholic schools. Similar to the public education landscape, the authors describe how urban Catholic schools experienced "white flight," leaving student populations that were increasingly more African-American, and more recently, Latino. They further detail struggles faced by dioceses to keep inner city Catholic

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schools open amidst declining enrollments and high attrition rates (nearly 11% from 2000 to 2006, and in some urban areas almost 20%). As they relate the closures of urban Catholic schools, the authors ask a critical question: What happens to these communities once their parish school closes?

Brinig and Garnett's study explores how urban Catholic schools might have operated as community institutions and impacted their communities by examining data on neighborhood changes that occur once the schools cease to exist. The authors use data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN) to determine levels of neighborhood crime and distress after a local Catholic school closes. Notably, the authors compare data by geographic location and find that after a neighborhood loses a Catholic school, it indeed experiences an increase in crime and social disorder, and as a result, experiences a loss of social capital. Although the crime data is compelling, additional data come from a community survey of 4000 residents. The authors acknowledge that the survey is not the best indicator of social capital, as it relies on perceptions of disorder and crime in a community and, admittedly, the demographics of a community (e.g. racial bias) could influence responses. The study also used Chicago Archdiocese parish data, including demographic data, to ensure that the analysis could predict why a Catholic school closed. This is an important element to the study because it controls for neighborhood health when comparing communities after the closure of a Catholic school and points to the importance of pastoral leadership and its impact on parish schools.

The authors subsequently describe their attempts to replicate the study in Philadelphia and Los Angeles, only to find that the hypothesis applied to Philadelphia but not to Los Angeles. The authors argue that while the proliferation of Catholic schools in Chicago mirrored the trend in Philadelphia, Los Angeles Catholic schools were slower to establish, and Los Angeles neighborhoods experience low levels of social capital, due in part to existing mistrust between residents of different ethnic groups.

The book also explores the question of whether charter schools have similar effects on urban communities. This choice is most likely a response to a trend of urban Catholic schools converting to charter schools (Prothero 2014). Catholic education historians will note that the conversion from Catholic to public schools is not new and has roots in the late 19th century (Walch 2003). The authors found that the presence of a charter school in a neighborhood did not diminish crime as compared to neighborhoods with a Catholic school. Throughout these comparisons, it seems logical that Catholic school

closures would more significantly impact a community when compared to a charter school given that charter schools are more likely to be a new addition to the community and perhaps lack connections with residents beyond school children. Given the recent closures of non-charter, neighborhood public schools in both Philadelphia and Chicago, it would be interesting to conduct a similar study to compare how traditional public school closures impact a neighborhood's social capital.

Certainly, Brinig and Garnet's findings demonstrate a correlation between Catholic parish schools and social capital in a neighborhood context. However, it is difficult to make the claim that the closure of the Catholic parish schools alone *caused* the increase in crime and decrease in neighborhood social trust. A social analysis would help explain how blight or racial and class segregation took shape in these neighborhoods and how these factors impact community institutions, including Catholic schools. Research on "white flight" has found detrimental and lasting effects on communities, and upon schools in particular, when white middle class residents leave a neighborhood (Anyon 1997). Upon further investigation, these segregated communities suffer at the hands of social and economic forces tainted by structural racism. Schools are left to deal with the insurmountable task of lifting entire neighborhoods from poverty and often find themselves ill-equipped to meet this goal. The authors' lack of socioeconomic and political investigation of these communities leaves unanswered questions about what else could have contributed to these neighborhood trends.

More importantly, the study reifies the notion that Catholic parish schools can serve as a community center if they have strong support from the pastor. Before reviewing neighborhood effects, the authors found that parish schools were more likely to close if the pastor was weak (as measured by a survey). In this manner, the role of the pastor is linked to parish schools' survival, but can also be correlated to the development of social capital for communities. Although the study does not explore exactly what pastors do to support parish schools or communities, Brining and Garnett's study will hopefully encourage other researchers to engage in subsequent research to address questions not answered in this initial study. Those interested in Catholic educational leadership might be particularly interested in conducting future research that focuses on how pastors can develop social capital for communities.

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