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Revision of Student Learning Expectations in the Context of Relationships

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Abstract

Saint Philip's Catholic School is situated in the Noe Valley in San Francisco, an expensive residential area of the city. It is currently in the process of preparing for a midcycle visit from WASC/WCEA, the accreditation body for Catholic schools. During its most recent accreditation process, revision of the Schoolwide Learning Expectations (SLEs) was identified as a goal. The Report of Findings noted this as "Annual review and revision of the SLEs by all community shareholders." (ISL 2012, p. 16). Feedback from faculty also indicated that there was a need for the SLEs to be revised, so that they would resonate with all members of the community and become more relatable to the students. Comments about the current SLEs referred to them as "limiting," and "not concrete enough for students to grasp." This action research project examined the current SLEs in light of the extent to which they reflect the framework of relationships that are central to the students' spiritual, academic, emotional and social development. Data from written responses, an online survey, and listening sessions were collected from faculty, staff, parents, and students. While the results indicated that the current SLEs somewhat reflect the framework of relationships, the data also provided suggestions to improve these, including a revision of descriptors that would support spiritual, academic, emotional and social development. Findings also indicated that the expectations should be applicable not just to students but should be extended to include all members of the learning community.

Keywords: Catholic, relationships, spiritual, academic, emotional, social, community

Revision of Student Learning Expectations in the Context of Relationships

Current Student Learning Expectations (SLEs) at our school site do not adequately reflect the essence of our school. They do not fully center on the relationships that mark us a Catholic school. Because the SLEs were determined many years ago, they do not resonate with everyone. And they are in need of a more organized approach that will give them better visibility and appeal. Also, they are currently listed as “Student” rather than “Schoolwide” Learning Expectations. As such, this implies that they are applicable to the students only, and not the faculty and staff. As a school that prides itself on community, it is important that these are renamed “Schoolwide,” to reflect the fact that our mission is a collective one and includes all members of the school community in its expectations.

Current SLEs do not fully capture the essence of our school community, with the many layers of experience it offers through its commitment to the spiritual, academic, emotional and social development of its students. Although many of the students’ experiences are noted in the current SLEs, they do not adequately focus on many aspects of their Catholic education that are considered central to our mission. And several of the descriptors/criteria are vague and somewhat redundant in their lack of specificity; although they may apply to a broad subject/target area, they tend to seem generic rather than having a more direct resonance.

Having SLEs for K through 2 and a second set for 3 through 8 was designed so that students in lower grades might more easily access them, making them more manageable for the younger readers. However, this is not in keeping with the idea that we are one community, sharing one set of expectations, regardless of grade or age. Combining both sets and creating something new reinforces the importance of all of us working together to achieve the same expectations.

Currently, our SLEs are in our Parent-Student Handbook. The updated SLEs will be added to the school's website, allowing prospective parents and students to appreciate the centrality of these to our school. It will also reinforce their importance among the current school body and emphasize our goal to imbue these across our daily school life.

Relationships: The relationships we cultivate at our school site provide a basis for our students to grow spiritually, academically, emotionally, and socially. They help to define who we want our students to become, and as such, are central to our Student Learning Expectations (SLEs). Using relationships as a framework for our students' education and development defines our work in Catholic schools (Cook & Simonds, 2011, p.323) and helps us better understand our mission and priorities. Student Learning Expectations that don't focus on relationships fail to truly address the task we have as educators in a Catholic school, where we seek to meet the needs of the whole child. If we are to truly encourage them to grow in faith and love, we must examine how our expectations provide them with those opportunities at a spiritual and social level. As such, the Student Learning Expectations should include an emphasis on the relationship with self, God, others, the community (local and global) and Creation. (Cook & Simonds, 2011, p. 325). In this way, students will have an understanding of what it means to fully embrace what their Catholic education and faith is calling them to be.

Resonance: Our Student Learning Expectations were developed many years ago, created by a group of faculty members who are no longer at the school site. More recent faculty and staff members have not had an opportunity to discuss and contribute to a conversation on the Student Learning Expectations. Students have not been engaged in conversations around the expectations that are created for them; this is something that would have a place in the older grades in particular. Without complete buy-in, the risk is that the expectations are superficial and lack

relevance and authentic implementation as part of who we truly are. Although the basic tenets of the expectations echo much of what is happening at the school site, there is a need for further reflection on them and their relevance to the realities of today's world. Environmental issues are not clearly addressed. "Global issues" are listed as criteria for "Responsible Citizens" (Handbook, p. 7); yet there is no definitive mention of Creation, and our responsibility as stewards of the environment. Our relationship with God's Creation is not defined enough nor given enough significance to reflect the issues of today's environmental concerns and our subsequent responsibility.

Relatability: The current Student Learning Expectations - while not without merit in their efforts to define what we want for our students – need to be presented in a way that allows for them to be easily accessible to the students. Creating an acronym would make them more user-friendly, from the younger grades to the older learners.

Student Learning Expectations should reflect the essence of a school and mirror the character of the learning environment. As such, the relationships that are the grounding for the work that goes on at Catholic school must be considered when developing the expectations we have of our students and graduates; otherwise, they don't authentically express who we are. Without relevance to the society we live in, the Student Learning Expectations become simply a list of things to do, rather than an integral part of our school's mission. For these to be fully integrated into the life of our Catholic school, we must present these in a way that will allow students to know that they are living out the values and the mission of the school in a way that makes sense to them at their developmental level. For the Student Learning Expectations to become part of the fabric of the school's culture, they must focus on relationships, resonate with our school in today's society, and relate to the students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine current schoolwide expectations of the students in a K – 8 Catholic school to determine their relevancy to the essence of the school. In doing so, students, faculty, staff, and parents will understand the centrality of relationships to the work of this Catholic school.

Research Questions

The major research questions that were examined in this study were:

To what extent do the current Student Learning Expectations reflect the framework of relationships that are central to our students' spiritual development?

To what extent do the current Student Learning Expectations reflect the framework of relationships that are central to our students' academic development?

To what extent do the current Student Learning Expectations reflect the framework of relationships that are central to our students' emotional development?

To what extent do the current Student Learning Expectations reflect the framework of relationships that are central to our students' social development?

Literature Review

“Relationships are at the heart of what it means to be a Catholic school” (Cook and Simonds, 2011, p. 323). Using this as a framework, the current Student Learning Expectations (SLEs) can be examined through the lens of Church documents and scholarly writing on this topic, and in relation to learning expectations at other school sites.

Church documents. With Gospel teachings at its core, the importance of relationships becomes an intrinsic element of the mission of Catholic schools. As institutions designed to follow the teachings of Jesus, the work we do must, too, center on how we cultivate relationships among our students, faculty and staff, parents, and community.

Review of Church documents on Catholic education further support the importance of relationships at the center of its mission. Pope Pius XI wrote about the role of education as “not merely for each individual, but for families and for the whole of human society.” (*Divini Illius Magistri*, 1929, #8); testament to the value relationships and interactions play in the purpose of education. With our faith as the guiding element in our mission in Catholic education, we are called to place our relationship with God at the center of our schools. Pope Paul VI further emphasized that calling by stating that our students are being educated “for service in the spread of the Kingdom of God” (*Gravissimum educationis*, 1965, #25) and that Catholic schools are charged with ensuring that the education of students is “illuminated by faith” (*Gravissimum educationis*, 1965, #25).

Relationships between human beings, grounded in acts of service and faith, is the manifestation of the Kingdom of God. As such, the expectations we have of ourselves, our students, and our parent community must reflect this calling to spread the Kingdom of God. The commitment to community is key to the fostering of relationships, and “building and living community must be prime, explicit goals of the contemporary Catholic Schools” (Pastoral Message on Catholic Education, USCCB, 1972 #108). At the core of any community is the interconnectedness of its people. If we are to consider a Catholic school as “a center for human formation,” (Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, Section III), then we must subsequently consider that “formation” in light of the human interactions this implies. The

writing goes on to espouse the importance of relationships, where the expectation for students is that they will be part of a “community whose values are communicated through the interpersonal and sincere relationships of its members” (#32). Relationships between human beings, grounded in acts of service and faith, is the manifestation of the Kingdom of God.

If we are to truly embrace this calling as Catholic educators, then this demands that we foster in our students the centrality of relationships to all aspects of that faith. This includes the relationships our students have with God and each other. Pope John Paul II viewed Catholic schools’ mission to help its students “know their duties to God, to themselves and their neighbors” as both a “challenge” and a contribution.” (*Veritatis Splendor*, 1993, 4). More recent Church documents continue to uphold the value of relationships as an inherent measure of our mission in Catholic education, highlighting the “centrality of the human person, who has his or her constitutive element in relationships with others.” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2013, #57)

Scholarly Writings. “Relationships make up the basic fabric of human life and must not be pushed to the periphery of educational considerations.” (Shields, 2004, p.116). As such, they become an integral part of the school’s mission and identity, woven into the very essence of the school. In his book, “Sharing Faith,” Groome proposed that education should center on “the agent-subjects-in relationship” (1991, ps. 8-9), a suggestion that places emphasis on the need to foster the many relationships that our students will experience. Our faith, too, calls us into harmony with each other, as it is based on the teachings of Jesus that promote love and understanding.

The relationships that are developed within the community of a school (Coleman, 1988) are central to the mission of Catholic education. As such, that mission must be to teach students the value of community as a place where care, compassion, and inclusion are held sacred. Convey, too, acknowledged “the relationship established between culture and the Gospel” (2012, p. 189) and its bearing on Catholic education. If we are to be truly Gospel-based, then, our school’s culture must be imbued with values that reflect those teachings. And Gospel teachings are centered on the relationships with God and with one another. When a school is open to creating a “culture of relationships” (Cook, 2011, p. 319), students are afforded opportunities to grow and nurture those relationships with God, self, others, and Creation. He roots this “culture of relationships” in our Catholic belief in the Trinity and the role relationships play in our Catholic theology. As with any culture, it is founded on the interplay between the members of the community. When our students are guided in their spiritual lives and are taught to be models of their faith in action, then we have created that “culture of relationships.”

The “apostolic dimension” (Fussell, 2019, p.33) of the role of Catholic educators gives priority to the service of others that is an integral part of Catholic education. At the heart of student service projects, for example, lies a connection between fellow human beings. In Jonathan Doyle’s book, “Tools and Fuels,” we are reminded that our calling as Catholic educators is to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and “make disciples” (2017, Loc. 271); this call to evangelization centers on building relationships. Our students are taught to be living witnesses to their faith by the ways in which they interact with each other. The opportunities we give our students to live out this teaching will inevitably involve building relationships between them and others.

Writers like Hobbs (2005) and Mirra (2018) have placed Catholic education in the context of a modern framework. As our students increasingly engage in the digital world, the relationships cultivated by them need to be examined through the lens of our Catholic faith, so that dignity and equity are not lost in the maze of social media that is their new reality. Our role as Catholic educators is to help students understand that the world of relationships does not need to be at odds with the teachings of Christ and His call for neighborly love and tolerance.

Doyle wrote of the role of Catholic educators and administrators as one of “partnering with God” (2017, Loc. 480); like any successful partnership, this must be founded on a relationship. Through a faith community founded on relationships, schools dedicate themselves to “building the Kingdom of God on earth.” (Fussell, 2019, p. 31); when we foster positive relationships as part of our school’s mission, then we are fulfilling our calling to witness to the “Kingdom of God.” Cook and Simonds believed that “Catholic schools should set a new course for the future by making relationship building the distinctive purpose of all their school programs.” (2011, p. 322) When we attend to the spiritual, academic, social and emotional wellbeing of our students, we are doing just this. They referred to the “keystone” that relationships are to Catholic schools (2011, p. 324). All of this validates our efforts to give relationships a central role in our schools.

And these relationships are not limited to those between students; the relationship between the teacher and student is critical in our efforts to truly promote the wellbeing of the “whole child.” (Parent-Student Handbook, 2018-20219, p. 5). Researchers have noted that “an essential aspect of a Catholic education is the relationship between students and teachers” (Maney, King, Kiely, 2017, p. 37). Tobbell & O’Donnell write about “interpersonal” relationships (2013, p.2); this, too, reiterates the notion of connectedness, and how this forms the

basis of much of what we do at Catholic school. If we are to change the wording of the current *Student Learning Expectations (SLEs)* to *Schoolwide*, then this implies a buy-in from all members of the school community and is truly indicative of our commitment to have *all* relationships at the center of our new SLEs.

Other School Sites. Review of Student/Schoolwide Learning Expectations from four different Catholic schools provided further evidence of the importance of relationships. Descriptors reflect the centrality of relationships with self, others, God, and community. Some of these descriptors are:

- “Demonstrate respect for family, the local and global community, and the earth through acts of stewardship”
- “Resolve conflicts in a peaceful manner”
- “Communicate and collaborate meaningfully with others”
- “Understand the reason for rules and take accountability for personal choices”
- “Recognize and appreciate diversity of cultures, languages, and faith traditions”

(St. Finnbarr Catholic School)

- “Worship and pray as a Catholic community”
- “Reflect the compassionate message of Jesus through their interactions”
- “Respect and embrace cultural differences”
- “Respond to the needs of each other, the community, and the world”
- “Participate as responsible stewards of the earth”
- “Face challenges with the perseverance and inner strength to stand for what is right”

(St. Paul Catholic School)

- “Acknowledge the existence and presence of God”
- “Work individually and cooperatively in finding solutions”
- “Appreciate other cultures and religions”
- “Participate in humanitarian and environmental service projects”
- “Develop an awareness of the social and emotional needs of others”
- “Support and encourage their fellow schoolmates”

(St. Thomas More Catholic School)

- “Respond with empathy and compassion to all”
- “Practice social justice and an awareness of global issues”
- “Perform community service”
- “Advocate for self and others”
- “Show faith in God by participating in the liturgy”
- “Show compassion for others by serving them with a commitment to social justice”
- “Show respect for themselves by taking care of the whole self, body and soul”
- “Show love for the earth by being stewards of God’s creation”

(Ecole Notre Dame des Victoires Catholic School)

Method

The purpose of this study was to examine the current Student Learning Expectations (SLEs) of the students in a K – 8 Catholic school to determine their relevancy to the essence of the school. The study was created to answer the research questions.

This mixed-methods study described the opinions of students, teachers, staff, and parents on how well the current SLEs reflect the framework of relationships that is central to the

spiritual, academic, emotional, and social development of the students. Data were collected through written responses, an online survey, and listening sessions. The narrative data were transcribed and coded to address the research questions.

Setting

The research was conducted in an urban K-8 Catholic school in San Francisco, CA. The school has been a fixture of the local community for over 80 years. The school's demographic is mostly White (approximately 66%). Written responses from teachers were completed in the school, during teacher prep times. Online student surveys were conducted during class time at school. Students' classrooms, comprising individual desks and chairs, were used, so that students' responses in the survey were only visible to themselves. Parent written responses were done at home and returned to school. Listening sessions with teachers took place during a faculty meeting in the 8th Grade classroom. Listening sessions also took place during a staff meeting in the conference room, a small room adjacent to the principal's office. It has a round table and chairs and is ideal for small gatherings.

Note: For the purposes of this paper, "staff" refers to teacher's aides.

Participants

Participants were selected as a purposive sample. Teachers were selected because of their role in working with students across the disciplines, so as to provide a range of criteria for the SLEs that would reflect the different age groups, developmental levels, and abilities of the students. Also, teachers are asked to select a student each month who best exemplifies any of the descriptors on each SLE. This student is then given the Bruin of the Month Award and

recognized in front of his/her peers at a school assembly or following mass. Eleven teachers (nine female and two male), consisting of homeroom teachers, Science, and Learning Support, were included in the process.

All 32 students in 5th Grade and all 23 students in 6th Grade (55 in total) were selected to participate in an original online survey because of their ability to understand the survey questions and to provide justification for their responses. They were also selected because they had already had an understanding of the current SLEs. Because 5th and 6th Grade students still have a few years left to complete Middle School, the revised SLEs would be implemented during their time at the school. The students were aged between 10 and 12 years old. In 5th Grade, seventeen participants were male and 15 were female; in 6th Grade, fourteen were male and nine were female. Of the thirty-two students in 5th Grade, twenty-nine identified as Catholic and three were non-Catholic. In 6th Grade, twenty were Catholic and three were non-Catholic. In 5th Grade, the majority of students were White (24), five identified as Multi-Racial, one was Other-Asian, and two declined to state ethnicity. In 6th Grade, most of the students identified as White (16), two as Other-Asian, two as Hispanic, one as African American, one as Japanese, and one as Multi-Racial.

Six parents were selected to provide written responses. Out of the six, five chose to participate. The parents were selected to include parents who have been part of the community for a number of years, and who are familiar with the SLEs and with the school's efforts to meet the spiritual, academic, emotional and social needs of the students. As parents, their role as the primary educator needed to be considered in this process. Four Catholic and two non-Catholic parents were selected. Of the five parents who took part, two were male and three were female. They were asked to provide a written response to questions on the current SLEs.

Four female staff members, all teachers' aides, were invited to discuss the SLEs. As members of the community, many of them have been at the school for a lengthy amount of time and have had extensive experience with the students and their needs. They were given a set of questions on the SLEs and were asked to discuss and then write their responses.

Measurement Instruments

Written Responses. Teachers, parents and staff were provided a written set of questions to ascertain their opinions on the current SLEs and on the extent to which the SLEs addressed the research questions. A copy of the SLEs was attached to the written questions, so that participants could easily access the text and provide edits where needed. There are currently four SLEs, each with descriptors. (See Appendix A). The eight questions provided opportunities for the participants to find areas of strength, as well as areas for improvement, in the current SLEs.

Eight questions were asked; four of these were designed to answer the research questions as follows:

- Question 3 corresponded to Research Question 1
- Question 4 corresponded to Research Question 2
- Question 5 corresponded to Research Question 3
- Question 6 corresponded to Research Question 4

The other questions asked for feedback on the strengths of the current SLEs (Q.1) and what might need to be changed to better reflect the essence of the school (Q.2). Participants were

also given the option to suggest additions to the current SLEs (Q.7) as well as their opinion on whether the SLEs should become “Schoolwide” instead of “Student.” (Q.8) Participants were also asked to answer open-ended questions such as “Is there anything you feel needs changed to better reflect who we are?” (See Appendix B) The written responses from teachers were further developed by the addition of their rationale for the suggestions and edits they had made concerning the original SLEs.

Survey Instrument. An original survey instrument (using SurveyMonkey) was created to ascertain how important the current SLEs were to students in 5th and 6th Grade. (See Appendix C). The survey’s title was St. Philip’s School – Student Learning Expectations (SLE) Survey. The survey consisted of seven questions. The first five of these were based on statements on the SLEs. The responses were connected to a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *Not At All Important* (1) to *Extremely Important* (5). One question (Q.6) had an open-ended response, asking the students to provide suggestions for additions to the SLEs. Students were asked to give their response to the question: “Are there any other important expectations that are not reflected in the current SLEs?” One question (Q.7) used a semi open-ended response, with 3 options, to get students’ opinions on a suggested change to the current SLEs. The survey was administered by the homeroom teacher in both 5th and 6th Grades, during regular class time. It took about 20 minutes to complete and was done in one sitting.

The instruments used to gather data were valid and reliable, as they provided opportunities to gather qualitative data on the research questions from the participants. Themes emerged from the data, indicating the reliability of the measurement instruments across the various participant groups. The researcher sought the advice of an expert on surveys and data

collection, to better assess and review the instruments and the results for validity and reliability.¹

A sufficient number of participants in various roles was involved, so that the results reflected a strong cross-section of the school community's shareholders.

Listening Sessions. Listening sessions were conducted with teachers at a faculty meeting and with classroom aides during a meeting. A copy of the SLEs was provided for both sessions, so that participants could easily access the text as a reference. The aides were provided some written questions to prompt their discussion. These written questions were the same as those given to teachers and parents. The teachers' listening session was a follow-up to their written responses which had been done independently. It took place during a faculty meeting after school and lasted for approximately an hour. This session resulted in the creation of a revised set of Schoolwide Learning Expectations, along with specific descriptors for each, and an updated acronym.

Design and Procedure

This action research project used written responses, survey responses, and the results of listening sessions to answer the research questions. It took place over a period of 10 weeks, from September 2019 through November 2019.

Written responses were collected from teachers, parents and staff. Teachers and staff were asked to participate during a faculty and staff meeting respectively. The request to participate was done via email to all parents. Hard copies were given to all participants to use, and the

¹ The researcher wishes to acknowledge Carol Wicklund Enright, of Enright & Associates, for her assistance with the survey instrument and data analysis.

responses were returned manually from teachers and staff, and electronically from parents, by scanning and emailing their responses. Teachers and parents and were given a few days to complete the task; staff responses were collected following a meeting. Teacher responses and parent responses were compiled independently; staff responses were compiled as a group. The activity took approximately twenty minutes to complete for each group of participants.

The process also involved conducting an original survey with 5th and 6th Grade students, who were invited to participate by their homeroom teachers. This survey was completed online using SurveyMonkey and was carried out on October 25th. The homeroom teachers of each grade were nonparticipant observers; their role was to ensure that all students had access to the online survey and that there were no difficulties with technology. The surveys were conducted in one sitting during regular class time. They took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Results of the survey were accessible through SurveyMonkey within a few days of its completion.

A listening session with the faculty took place during a faculty meeting which was held in the 8th Grade classroom. Narrative data from the teachers, parents, and staff written responses were collected so that answers could be disaggregated and further revisions could be made. The researcher was an active participant in this. Notes were recorded by the vice-principal on a Google doc that was projected for everyone to see. The session began with the researcher reviewing the collective concerns over the current SLEs. The teachers were introduced to the acronym B-R-U-I-N, which had been suggested by one of the faculty in a written response. They were given suggestions on possible phrases that might form part of this acronym – “B” is for “Beacon of Faith” or “I” is for “Independent Learner.” These phrases had been suggested, based on the written responses the teachers had given. After discussion ensued so that these could be agreed upon, the teachers were asked to develop descriptors that would best connect with each

phrase and which would provide ample opportunity for the students to meet those expectations. It was agreed that the descriptors should be kept to three, making each SLE easier to assess. Consensus was reached on changing the word “Student” to “Schoolwide.”

This study was a mixed method study - both qualitative and quantitative. Data from the student survey and the responses from teachers, parents and staff were used to determine both strengths and areas of improvement concerning the current SLEs. Commentary from the open-ended survey questions and written responses served to generate feedback that was then used in the next stage of the process – the creation of a revised set of SLEs.

Data Analysis

Narrative data from the written responses were transcribed to determine the extent to which teachers, parents and staff felt the current SLEs reflect the essence of our school. The data were then organized and categorized through coding, so that themes could emerge. These themes were then compared to the research questions, to determine how well the current SLEs reflect the research question themes.

The survey questions were analyzed to determine the importance of the SLEs to the students and to assess their opinions on the descriptors of the SLEs. Responses were analyzed to understand the students’ perceptions of the most important aspects of the SLEs, in order to determine the resonance and relatability of the current SLEs, and their relevance to the spiritual, academic, emotional and social development of the students. Responses were also analyzed to determine how meaningful the SLE descriptors were to them, and to determine the extent to which the students felt these descriptors reflected the SLEs. The survey questions were intentionally worded differently from the research questions provided to teachers, parents and

staff, so that the language of the survey questions would be more familiar to the students. By doing this, an insight into the extent to which the SLES reflected the framework of relationships was possible, by posing the questions in a way that was easier for students to understand and respond to.

Frequency of key words was tracked in the students' open responses to the survey questions in order to identify themes. These words were examined in the context of the research questions to identify the emergence of themes related to these questions. Quotations from the survey were identified when they clearly related to the research question themes reflecting spiritual, academic, emotional, and social development. Examples include: "Being a producer and being confident are very important because you need to trust and believe in yourself and produce good work" (academic, emotional); "Being a responsible citizen is important to me because that means I can be trusted," (social) and "I think they are all important because we are all Christian" (spiritual)

With the listening sessions, narrative responses were examined according to the research questions and the themes of spiritual, academic, emotional and social relationships. Irrelevant data were removed to create a clearer picture of the emergent themes from these listening session discussions.

Data from the written responses, survey, and listening sessions were analyzed to determine connections and correlations. This was done by monitoring key words and themes, which were then used to develop the new SLEs.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine current schoolwide expectations of the students in a K – 8 Catholic school to determine their relevancy to the essence of the school. In doing so, students, faculty, staff, and parents would understand the centrality of relationships to the work of this Catholic school.

Written responses, an online survey instrument as well as listening sessions were used in this mixed-method study. Responses from the written responses, listening sessions, and open-ended survey questions were coded to determine emergent themes. Following the listening sessions, in which data from the written responses of the teachers, parents, and staff were discussed, key themes emerged in response to both the research questions (Q. 3-6) and the open-ended questions (Q. 1 & 2 and 7 & 8). These themes were dignity, accountability, understanding, passion for learning, and kindness.

Dignity: Participants felt that the dignity of the person should be reflected in the SLEs. This would include each respect for the dignity of others as well as self-worth. One participant wrote “it’s about treating others as we would want to be treated.”

Accountability: Participants felt that responsibility is an important attribute that should remain part of the revised SLEs. They agreed that accountability should be applicable to many areas – schoolwork, personal behavior and appearance, and community service. One participant wrote “Our responsibility is not just to do good for ourselves but our family, community, and fellow peers.”

Understanding: Participants felt that understanding of self and others was considered important. One participant commented that students should “seek to understand” others.

Passion for learning: Participants felt that, while learning is central to the work of schools, fostering in the students a love of learning is important. There was strong opinion on the importance of meeting the needs of a diverse group of learners, so that all could have the opportunity to “ask questions and have a passion for learning.” Meeting the needs of students with learning differences was considered important – the “accepting of individuals with differences.”

Compassion: Participants felt that “nurturing” should be central to the SLEs, in the students’ interactions with others. There was agreement on the importance of kindness at a broader level, beyond the classroom, in their role in community. Compassion and tolerance of self was also considered important, with one participant commenting that “we also need to know that we are human.”

Participants’ responses revealed their personal thoughts on how well the current SLEs addressed the spiritual, academic, emotional, and social development of the students. There was strong consensus among all participants that the current SLEs do address these four areas; however, there was also agreement that these could be further emphasized and developed. Participants shared their opinion that the academic program should support all learners, including those with learning differences. Many felt that the descriptor of “a strong foundation” (Producers) does not include all learners. One participant commented that “there might be room for exploring learning in a slightly less traditional environment.” The phrase “growth mindset” was used to express the importance fostering life-long learning in the students. Participants agreed that spiritual development could be further developed, where the students’ spiritual life could be “actively fostered,” as one person commented. Emotional development was also considered an important aspect of the current SLEs, with values such as “tolerance” and

“compassion” (Active Christian) already in place. Participants felt that social development was addressed through the current SLEs, with one participant commenting that the students should be given opportunities to “lead and serve their community.” There was widespread agreement that the expectations should become “Schoolwide” rather than “Student,” with the exception of one parent who felt that the responsibility should be on the individual student.

Survey responses were analyzed, using weighted averages, to determine which Student Learning Expectations were extremely important or very important to the students. Their responses (Q.1) revealed the following:

They considered being a Responsible Citizen the most important Student Learning Expectation (4.18), with 82% of participants ranking this as *very important*, or *extremely important*. Being a Self-Confident Individual ranked the next most important expectation (3.93); with 68% of participants also ranking this as being *very important*, or *extremely important*. The students considered being an Active Christian the next most important SLE (3.67), with 58% of participants ranking this as *very important*, or *extremely important*. Producers was the least important to them (3.44), with 43% of participants ranking this as *very important* or *extremely important*. Sample responses included “Being a responsible citizen is important to me because that means I can be trusted;” “I feel like being responsible is a key factor in life and it (SLE) will help the students of St. Philip’s to learn how to be confident and responsible;” “I said being an Active Christian was somewhat important because I am not a Christian;” “Being a producer and being confident are very important because you need to trust and believe in yourself and produce good work.”

Student responses indicated that the descriptors that best defined the SLES were the following: “strive to make active and positive contributions to the large community,” “work

cooperatively with others to set and accomplish goals,” “accept responsibility for their words and actions,” “express informed opinions and respect the opinion of others,” “value cultural differences and diversity,” and “recognize global issues and the importance of social justice.” Other descriptors that were considered strong were the following: “foster a sense of respect for self, others, God, Church, authority, and property” (Active Christian); “think critically and creatively, developing the ability to solve problems effectively,” (Producer); “take on leadership roles both inside and outside of school” and “accept challenges” (Self-Confident Individual). These descriptors are also relationship-focused.

Students were asked to explain their answers to the questions on descriptors, in an effort to determine what they think should be included in the descriptors for each expectation. Their responses revealed that seeing the value and dignity in themselves and others is important as a Self-Confident Individual. One student wrote that “students should always recognize their talents and never be self-conscious; they should always feel important and amazing about themselves.” Another student wrote that it is important to “recognize talents and gifts.” For Producers, students’ responses indicated that being “open-minded” is important. One student wrote that “curiosity and enthusiasm are very important.” Students’ responses to descriptors on being an Active Christian indicated that they considered respect for God and for others to be important. One response was “You have to have a respect for God, others, and yourself.” Several other responses indicated the importance of participation in liturgies. Respect was considered an important descriptor for Responsible Citizens, with students’ responses frequently mentioning this.

Responses to the open-ended survey question on suggested additions to the current SLEs (Q.6) revealed the following themes - respect, responsibility, and kindness. Phrases such as

“Being respectful to everyone around you” and “Being respectful to others” were included in the responses.

Responses to the survey question on whether the revised expectations should be “Schoolwide” rather than “Student” (Q.7) indicated an overwhelming number of students (71.43%) felt this would be something they would be in favor of. One student commented “I think this is a great idea because the students aren’t the only ones in our school community.”

Correlation between the teacher, parent, and staff responses and those of the students indicated that there was significant agreement on specific aspects of the current SLEs and descriptors. Themes that emerged from the teacher, parent, and staff responses were similar to some of those that emerged from the student survey responses. Themes from the written responses and listening sessions - dignity, accountability, understanding, passion for learning and compassion correlated with the key takeaways from the student surveys – respect, responsibility, open-mindedness, enthusiasm, and kindness. This indicated a consensus among all participants on specific criteria that should be included in the SLEs.

Dignity -Respect

Accountability - Responsibility

Understanding - Open-mindedness

Passion for Learning – Enthusiasm

Compassion – Kindness

Discussion and Extension

The purpose of this study was to examine current schoolwide expectations of the students in a K – 8 Catholic school to determine their relevancy to the essence of the school. In doing so,

students, faculty, staff, and parents will understand the centrality of relationships to the work of this Catholic school.

This action research project used written responses, survey responses, and the results of listening sessions to answer the research questions. It took place over a period of 10 weeks, from September 2019 through November 2019. Responses from the written questions, listening sessions, and open-ended survey questions were coded to determine emergent themes. Findings indicate that there is significant agreement among teachers, parent, staff, and students that the current Student Learning Expectations (SLEs) reflect the framework of relationships that are central to spiritual, academic, emotional, and social development; but that there is potential for improvement in addressing the extent to which this is the case.

Discussion of Major Findings

All development - spiritual, academic, emotional, and social – is built on relationships with God, self, others, and Creation (Cook & Simonds, 2011), and this development is fairly adequately reflected in the current SLEs and their descriptors. The themes that emerged from written responses, survey, and listening sessions were those that reflected relationships, indicating that relationships were important to all participants.

Responses from teachers, parents, and staff indicated that the expectations that they deemed the most important were those that reflected relationships, based on the themes that emerged from analysis of the data. Dignity, accountability, understanding, passion for learning and kindness all reflect the centrality of relationships, including relationships to self, God, and others. Community and interconnectedness are an integral part of the school; this was reflected in the importance given to expectations that reflected these. These themes also focus on spiritual,

academic, emotional, and social development, further evidence of the framework of relationships that are central to each of these.

Themes that emerged from analysis of students' responses - respect, responsibility, open-mindedness, enthusiasm, and kindness - also indicated that relationships are important to them. Again, community-based values are an important aspect of school life for our students; the emergence of these themes is in direct correlation with this.

While all the current SLEs address the spiritual, academic, emotional, and social aspects of student development, the expectations that were considered most important by the students were those that are relationship-based, such as Responsible Citizens. Being a Producer was considered the least important to them, perhaps because this category might be interpreted as less relationship-based, if the students consider relationships as only those beyond themselves.

When the findings on descriptors were analyzed in the context of the research questions on relationships, the data indicated the descriptors for Responsible Citizens were the most relationship-focused. Student responses indicated that the descriptors that best defined the SLES were the following: "strive to make active and positive contributions to the large community," "work cooperatively with others to set and accomplish goals," "accept responsibility for their words and actions," "express informed opinions and respect the opinion of others," "value cultural differences and diversity," and "recognize global issues and the importance of social justice." All of these Responsible Citizen descriptors are relationship-based, indicating a high correlation between their importance to the students and relationships. (See Figure 1). Other descriptors that were considered strong were the following: "foster a sense of respect for self, others, God, Church, authority, and property" (Active Christian); "think critically and creatively, developing the ability to solve problems effectively," (Producer); "take on leadership roles both

inside and outside of school” and “accept challenges” (Self-Confident Individual). These descriptors are also relationship-focused.

When asked to reflect on the descriptors that best reflected each expectation, the students’ responses, however, indicated that those for Producers were best matched. This might indicate that the descriptors for Producers are more tangible and less open to interpretation than other more relationship-centered expectations.

The descriptors that are least relationship-based, such as having “a basic knowledge of the teachings and history of the Church” (Active Christians) and demonstrating “a strong foundation in all basic subjects” (Producers) were considered weaker, according to the students’ responses. This would indicate that they did not place too much importance on those descriptors that do not reference relationships. Interestingly, however, one other descriptor which was considered weaker - “conscientious community members” for Self-Confident Individuals was a descriptor that would reflect the importance of relationships. There is a possibility that this was too vague for students to fully understand, and as such, provide an accurate response for.

The strong consensus among all groups of participants that the current SLEs should be changed from “Student” to “Schoolwide” further indicates the centrality of relationships to the school community. It was strongly felt that all members of the school community should strive to attain the expectations. “There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without significance.” (Corinthians, Chapter 14, Verse 10)

Action Plan

Discussion among the faculty and administration indicated that there was a need for the current SLEs to be reviewed and revised, so as to create more relevance for the students, and

provide a better reflection of the essence of the school and the centrality of relationships among its community. Current Student Learning Expectations (SLEs) at our school site do not *adequately* reflect the essence of our school. Although many of the SLEs and their descriptors are relationship-based, they do not *fully* center on the relationships that mark us a Catholic school. Because the SLEs were determined many years ago, they do not resonate with everyone. And they are in need of a more organized approach that will give them better visibility and appeal, so that students can more easily relate to them. Also, they are currently listed as “Student” rather than “Schoolwide” Learning Expectations. As such, this implies that they are applicable to the students only, and not the faculty and staff. As a school that prides itself on community, it is important that these are renamed “Schoolwide,” to reflect the fact that our mission is a collective one and includes all members of the school community in its expectations.

As a Catholic school community, we are charged with the spiritual, academic, emotional, and social development of the students, educating the “whole child” (Parent-Student Handbook, 2019-2020, p. 5). As such, it is essential that the expectation we set for our students create opportunities for them to develop in all these areas. The goal of revising the expectations was to make these more reflective of the essence of the school and the work that is done to develop the students spiritually, academically, emotionally, and socially.

The school is preparing for a mid-cycle visit from the accreditation body (WASC/WCEA). One of the critical goals that needed to be addressed is the review and revision of the SLEs to better support high achievement of all learners and to reflect the Catholic identity of the school.

The school is currently undergoing strategic planning to lift the programs at the school and move it forward with a vision to meet the needs of all learners and give students the

opportunities to thrive and “reach their full potential as unique individuals and global citizens” (Parent-Student Handbook, 2019-2020, p.1). Part of the strategic planning process involves re-examining the Catholic Identity of the school, giving it a stronger focus. This involves consideration of the implementation of the SLEs, and how this can best support the Catholic Identity of the school.

Following suggestions on the teacher, parent, staff and student responses, and after collaboration among faculty, a revised set of SLEs was created to better reflect the centrality of relationships that are at the heart of the school. The importance of resonance was considered when creating these, so that input from all participants could be included in drawing up the new expectations and their descriptors. The adoption of a new acronym served to make the new SLEs more relatable to students and faculty. The word “Student” was replaced with “Schoolwide,” to reflect participants’ consensus that the expectations should apply to all members of the school community. (See Appendix D)

The centrality of relationships is reflected in all expectations:

- “Beacons of Faith” focuses on the relationship with God, others, and community
- “Responsible Citizens” focuses on the relationship with self, others, and Creation
- “Unique People” focuses on the relationship with self, others, and the community
- “Independent Thinkers” focuses on the relationship with self and others
- “Nurturing Individuals” focuses on the relationship with others and community

Descriptors for each of the expectations also reflect the centrality of relationships:

- “Show reverence for God and His Creation”

- “Respect the dignity of others”
- “Live the Gospel through prayer and service”
- “Value their community and the environment”
- “Recognize and appreciate their talents and skills and those of others”
- “Demonstrate tolerance and understanding of themselves and others”
- “Learn throughout life”
- “Stand up for what is right and just”
- “Respect the differences in others”

So that the SLEs would resonate with students and the schoolwide community, combined emergent themes from analysis of the data were included in the expectations. The themes of dignity/respect, accountability/responsibility, understanding/open-mindedness, passion for learning/enthusiasm, compassion/kindness are reflected in the following expectations:

“Responsible Citizens” and “Nurturing Individuals:

These themes were also included in the descriptors for each expectation:

- “Show reverence for God and His Creation”
- “Respect the dignity of others”
- “Make just and empathic choices”
- “Show accountability for their words and actions”
- “Recognize and appreciate their talents and skills and those of others”
- “Demonstrate tolerance and understanding of themselves and others”
- “Seek to enrich their lives in meaningful ways”
- “Show curiosity, motivation, and a passion for knowledge”
- “Learn throughout life”

- “Stand up for what is right and just”
- “Respect the difference in others”
- “Serve as role models through kind words and actions”

A more detailed rationale for the adoption of revised criteria and descriptors is laid out in Appendix E.

B-R-U-I-N was adopted as the new acronym, so that the expectations would be more relatable, particularly to the students. They are familiar with this word, as it is the school’s mascot. Awards are given on a monthly basis, to honor students whose efforts reflect the expectations. Matching the acronym with the award serves to make it more meaningful and relatable. The BRUIN acronym was suggested by one of the teachers during a meeting, and unanimously agreed upon by all faculty members.

The revised Schoolwide Learning Expectations have been included in the strategic plan, as part of the Catholic Identity Task Force report. The development of these has been shared with the members of the task force, comprising teachers, the researcher, and a parent, who is also a member of the Consultative Board. The revised SLEs have been included in the WASC/WCEA mid-cycle Progress Report, under the section of Critical Goals.

Dissemination

The revised SLEs will be shared with the student body after the Christmas break, so that the teachers can begin implementing these across the grade levels and throughout the curriculum. Laminated posters will be created to make these visible to the students.

The revised SLEs will be shared with the Consultative Board at the January meeting, minutes from which will be shared with the superintendent or associate superintendent. They will be included in the weekly bulletin to parents and will be added to the school's website in January.

The revised SLEs will be shared with the parent and parish community at the annual "School Report" event in the Spring. The Parent-Student Handbook will be updated in the new school year, to include the revised SLEs. These will also feature in the Faculty Handbook for the next school year.

Limitations

One limitation was the number of parent participants. An effort was made to solicit responses from a varied group that included a balance of male and female, Catholic and non-Catholic, and parents who have been part of the school community for a long time, and those who have been part of the community for a shorter time. However, upon reflection, the invitation to participate should have been extended to a wider group of parents, such as the Consultative Board. The board includes some former parents, who represent the parish. Participation from a wider group would have provided additional insight and a broader range of suggestions on which to build. This limitation would be avoided in future by inviting all members of the board rather than specifically asking a select group.

Future Directions

The creation of a rubric to assess the SLEs is the next step in this process. This will allow teachers to gauge how well the revised expectations and descriptors resonate with and relate to the students. This is also important because the monthly Bruin awards will be based on

the SLEs, and recipients will be selected based on meeting these expectations. The SLEs will continue to be revised on a regular basis. Doing so will allow us, as a school community, to reflect on the needs of the community of learners, so that the SLEs are in alignment with those needs.

This project has been a labor of love. It was purposefully designed to create buy-in among faculty, staff, and students, and to include the perceptions of parents. Because community is central to the school, it was important to work on a project where many participants had an opportunity to provide input and share their suggestions.

Revising Schoolwide Learning Expectations helped to focus on the many aspects of our students' development that we, as Catholic educators and administrators, are responsible for. As a Catholic School, we have a commitment to excellence and to meeting the needs of the whole child; this work has allowed that challenge to remain as a focal point for the work we do. It is a reminder of our mission to place the Gospel message at the center of our school, where we educate by opening minds and hearts, and following Christ's message of love. Archbishop Miller's words that the students must be "seen as a person whose intellectual growth is harmonized with spiritual, religious, emotional, and social growth" (2006) serve as a reminder of the importance of placing our students and their needs at the center of our work in Catholic education.

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Figure 1

Correlation between Relationship-focused SLEs/ Descriptors and their Importance to Students

SLE Descriptor	Weighted Average for Importance.	Relationship Factor
Being A Responsible Citizen	4.18	High
Strive to make active and positive contributions to the larger community	3.87	High
Work cooperatively with others to set and accomplish goals	3.72	High

Accept responsibility for their words and actions	3.70	High
Express informed opinions and respect the opinions of others	3.42	High
Value cultural differences and diversity	3.37	High
Recognize global issues and the importance of social justice	3.28	High

Appendix A: Student Learning Expectations Grades K to 2 & 3 to 8

Appendix B: *Written Questions*

Appendix C: Student Survey

Appendix D: Revised Schoolwide Learning Expectations

Appendix E: *Rationale for SLE Revisions*

