

SHIFTS IN U.S. CENSUS POPULATIONS, U.S. CATHOLIC POPULATIONS, AND
U.S. RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND THE STORY IT REVEALS TO CATHOLIC
EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

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Introduction

The role of Catholic education in the life of the Church has been the subject of discussion by many prominent leaders (DeFiore, Convey, & Schuttloffel, 2009, p.3). Catholic education has been examined in the context of a call to serve the community at large, not to be limited to those of prominent means. “Recognition of the past failures should not obscure the fact that the Church in many places does provide a wide variety of services for the poor, including schools of high quality, often at the cost of heroic sacrifice and with encouraging success” (USCCB, 1973, p.34). This call to educate can also be seen in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. “The influence of the Church in the field of education is shown in a special manner by the Catholic school. No less than other schools does the Catholic school pursue cultural goals and the human formation of youth” (Flannery, 1996). This influence is being affected by three significant shifts; population shifts in the United States; population shifts in the dioceses of the United States; and shifts in religious beliefs and perceptions. The responses of various dioceses to these shifts have varied. Having an understanding of the story that these three simultaneous shifts reveal may be an asset to future Catholic educational leaders and their subsequent responses.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is fourfold: 1) to tell the story of what is happening in the Northeast region of the United States in relation to the demographics, ethnicity and migration of the population, based upon the U.S. Census 2) to tell the story of what is happening within the Catholic dioceses in the Northeast region of the United States in relation to Catholic elementary school population, based upon the Catholic Almanac 3) to tell the story of what is happening to perceptions surrounding belief and religion, in the Northeast region of the United States, based

upon the Pew Forum's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 4) to determine if the overlay of these three stories reveal a fresh perspective on what is happening to Catholic school enrollment in the Northeast region of the United States.

Problem Statement

The population of the Catholic elementary schools has been on the downward trend since 1965 (DeFiore, 2011, p.2). Changes do not occur in isolation. It may be helpful to better understand the changes that are occurring from within and outside of the Catholic Church. This research will look at these changes in three tiers. First the changes in the demographics of the United States as reported in the Census reveal clear shifts (Mackun and Wilson, 2011). Second, changes in the demographics within the Catholic Church reveal shifts as well, as is noted in the Catholic Almanac (Bunson, 2012, pp. 433-440). As one digs deeper, it is clear that there have also been changes in the perceptions of Americans toward religion and belief, as is noted in the Pew U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious beliefs and practices (2008). Each of these tiers of change tells a story in its own right. The problem is that, for the Catholic educational leader, the understanding of each of these stories is essential to moving into a successful future. While having an understanding of each of these stories is daunting enough, albeit accessible through many studies, the overlay of these tiers may reveal a different story. One example of the complexity of this overlay may be seen in a 1993 study published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, which discovered that in areas of the country where religion is most pluralistic, the ordination rates, ratio of priests to Catholics and Catholic school enrollment are proportionally the highest (Stark & McCann, 1993, pp. 111, 113 – 114, 118). An example of rather dramatic demographic shifts may be seen in Hughes' *Waves* presentation, which

demonstrates the great changes in NY and throughout the country (Hughes, 2010a). It is this story that is essential to successful Catholic school leadership. No changes occur in a vacuum. It is difficult to determine if there are causal relationships between the changes in these three stories. Seeing a view of the Catholic elementary school enrollment story through this multilayered overlay may enable the leader to construct a more accurate view of the future.

Significance

This study may better inform Catholic educational leaders about the environment in which their Catholic school exists and how changes within the external environment will offer challenges and opportunity for enrollment. Many studies have looked at the role that local factors have had on enrollment such as test scores, finances, facilities and local demographics. This somewhat narrow view of the situation has left leaders little time to understand and react to changes. Having a better understanding of trends in the larger social world will offer a narrative for the future that will be essential for Catholic educational leaders to understand, in order to survive and thrive.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the study:

- 1) What are the shifts in the U.S. population in the Northeast region based upon age, ethnicity, income and education, according to the U.S. Census Bureau?
- 2) What are the shifts in Catholic elementary school population between 2004 and 2011 within the dioceses of the Northeast region of the United States, according to the Catholic Almanac?

- 3) What is happening to perceptions surrounding belief and religion, in the Northeast region of the United States, based upon the Pew Forum's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey?
- 4) What story is revealed by overlaying the changes observed as a result of investigating the three aforementioned questions?

Limitations

- 1) Catholic school enrollments are reported to various census taking groups such as the NCEA and Catholic Almanac through diocesan offices. It is difficult to determine if there is accuracy in the reported enrollment numbers.
- 2) The U.S. Census utilizes data which it is able to collect. There exist in the United States a number of undocumented persons and persons without dwelling places which may not be adequately reflected in these data.
- 3) Religious perception surveys are limited by the potential gap between the language utilized in the survey questions and the respondents' understanding of what that language means in their own personal milieu.

Theoretical Framework

Hughes' "5-Cs" theory helps us to take the giant step from collecting data to understanding data. Raw data in and of itself are somewhat meaningless collections of information. There are five careful steps that can be taken in order to bring meaning to these data. Step one is to look at what is contained in the data set. Hughes calls this "content" (Hughes, 2010b). Step two is to examine where these data places us on a spectrum. Hughes

calls this “compare” (Hughes, 2010b). Step three is to analyze how these data distinguish us from the others. Hughes calls this “contrast” (Hughes, 2010b). Step four is to look at the data sets against a larger universe. Hughes calls this “context” (Hughes, 2010b). Step five is to utilize these data in order to determine how we are to move forward. Hughes calls this “construct” (Hughes, 2010b).

The following figure illustrates Hughes’ 5 – Cs Framework and the major questions that each area seeks to investigate.

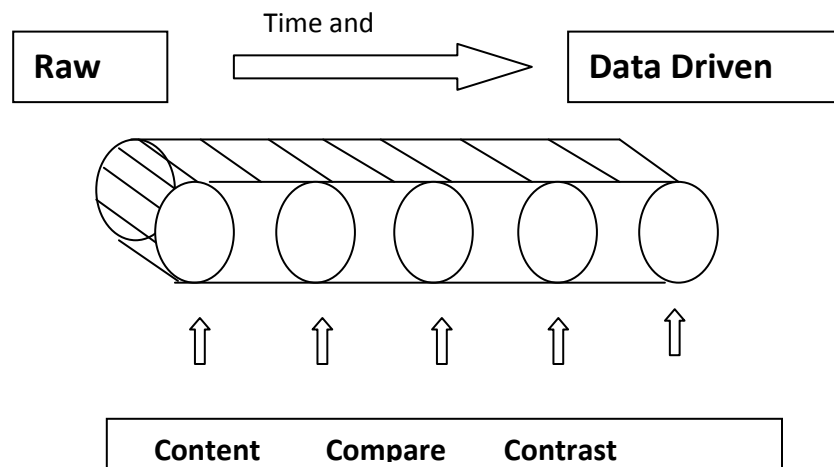
Figure 1.1 Hughes’ 5-Cs

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • – Content • – Compare • – Contrast • – Context • – Construct 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do we have? • How are we different? • Where do we stand? • Why are we here? • How do we move forward?
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Conceptual Framework

The following figure illustrates Hughes’s 5-Cs Framework in a conceptual manner. It may aid the researcher in understanding the process whereby raw data is mined to allow for data based decision making.

Figure 1.2 Hughes’ 5-Cs



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