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How Is Student Success Conceptualized in Catholic Schools?

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Abstract

This article examines the conceptualization of academic success in Catholic schools, inquiring how these institutions balance integral formative education and academic performance. Based on 16 interviews with teachers and administrators, as well as a questionnaire administered to 700 students and parents across eight schools, the study identifies inconsistencies when achievement of good grades is seen as a result of fostering a value-based education. Using a mixed-methods approach (qualitative–quantitative), we analyze perceptions of what defines a successful student and the school practices that promote such development. The findings reveal intergenerational differences and highlight the challenges of aligning institutional and personal expectations. The study concludes that, for Catholic institutions, elements rooted in the Christian tradition—such as commitment to the world and the Church, students' happiness, and integral education—constitute key indicators within the success–failure binomial.

Key words:

Success, failure, academic performance, Catholic school, integral programs

I. Introduction

Within the framework of the fiftieth anniversary of *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965), the document entitled *Conciliar Declaration on Christian Education* continues to serve as a key reference for defining the principal features of a Catholic identity in schools. In this declaration, schools are recognized as institutions with an ecclesial identity, participating in the mission of the Church founded on the person of Christ, whose primary task is to communicate the Gospel (Méndez Siliuto et al., p. 33).

It is undeniable that Catholic confessional schools have made a significant contribution to education in Chile and much of Latin America, particularly in contexts where processes of secularization and debates on religion in the public sphere have emerged belatedly. The

objective contribution of this educational subsector is, first and foremost, historical, but also social and cultural.

The historical perspective acknowledges the role of the Church in formative education of future citizens since the time of the conquest. Its influence has endured, having been consolidated today into an educational offering that remains attractive even to non-believing parents. Its social and cultural role contributes to education of citizens committed to the common good and to both local and global needs, speaking of an education that transforms temporal realities into a key to transcendence.

The Catholic education subsystem faces new challenges due to the constant transformations in educational policy. Chile has undergone multiple reforms over the past 20 years, aimed at improving education through new curricular standards, greater professional accountability, expanded school choice, and increased teaching regulations.

In addition to these demands, Catholic schools face specific transformations, such as decline in religious personnel, school closures due to low enrollment, accountability challenges, and financial difficulties. Nevertheless, a positive aspect of Chile's market-oriented reforms over the past 30 years is that they have diversified educational projects and facilitated creation of new schools, many of them serving disadvantaged populations.

This dynamism is particularly evident in consolidated Catholic educational projects, as well as in the emergence of new, highly selective Catholic schools (Ilabaca & Corvalán, 2020). Nevertheless, these reforms have also had negative consequences, requiring redirection of action and practices to align with public policy and, in doing so, becoming part of the wounds and inequities present in society (Madero & Gutiérrez, 2012).

The new scenario challenges this educational subsector to reinforce its historical mission: education of socioeconomically vulnerable communities, not only as a means of safeguarding its identity but also as a way of validating its function and social presence. In addition to serving vulnerable populations, Catholic education also welcomes immigrants and students of diverse faiths and unbelief, thereby providing a valuable service to local communities.

Making a preferential option for the poor should not be a matter of debate for Catholic schools; it is an essential feature of their identity. In this regard, the question arises: what have Catholic schools done for the most disadvantaged sectors? A report from Catholic Schools in Los Angeles (2011) highlighted the need to reinforce traditionally successful elements such as a core curriculum, high parental involvement, spiritual development, positive and safe environments, and a focus on value-based education—all of which are recognized in the academic literature as significant contributions.

Among these aspects, the high expectations of Catholic institutions regarding their students' future performance stand out, grounded in the confidence that they will continue on to higher education. These expectations are supported by personalized environments, where teachers, through close relationships and a deep knowledge of their students, implement strategies to ensure their success, framed within a Christian understanding of the world and of human beings as persons.

These transformations have led schools to develop a terminology around educational quality, using terms such as "quality indicators," "quality assurance," "satisfactory (or unsatisfactory)

performance,” and “school success” (or “school failure”). Despite the frequent use of these terms, little attention has been paid to their actual meaning. For this reason, it is essential to examine how members of Catholic school communities understand concepts such as “school success” and “school failure,” as these are fundamental to what is understood today as educational quality.

In this context, it is essential to analyze how members of Catholic school communities understand the notions of “school success.” These institutions, based on a Christian anthropological vision, could offer unique perspectives or new connotations that can enrich the definition of educational quality. Furthermore, given that Catholic schools represent 40% of the Chilean educational system (according to the Ministry of Education), their contributions could be fundamental in enriching discussion about educational policies and quality. From this, the following questions arise: How is school success understood in Catholic schools? How do administrators, teachers, students, and parents/guardians approach these concepts? It is not easy to delimit what is meant by success in school contexts. As with many education-related processes, achievement of a comprehensive description requires an interdisciplinary approach.

A first approach views school success as the absence of failure. To promote that, it would suffice to systematize good practices and identify factors that lead to positive outcomes, such as good grades, access to higher education, or academic excellence (Antelm, Gil-López, & Cacheiro-González, 2015). School failure is associated with dropout, abandonment, and academic underachievement (Grañeras, Gil, & Díaz-Caneja, 2011), dimensions that are common in contexts of socioeconomic vulnerability, where students face greater difficulties in meeting learning standards. Thus, both success and failure are social processes constructed as a result of the dynamics, practices, and internal judgments of schools (Cruz Flores & Matus Ortega, 2019).

Conceiving school success and failure as opposite visions reflects what Dweck (2006) argues, namely that this conception reveals a fixed mindset regarding intelligence and learning. A fixed mindset views success as confirmation of natural talent and failure as evidence of incapacity, leading individuals to avoid challenges for fear of making mistakes. Dweck (2006) proposes the growth mindset, which interprets success in terms of effort and perseverance and regards failures as opportunities for learning.

A second approach, consistent with the first, addresses school success and failure from a dualistic perspective, in which integral formation is seen as a threat to academic performance. Schools prioritize curricular aspects directly related to performance, while neglecting broader dimensions of growth that envision a new framework for integral education. Thus, success is linked to the complexities of taking into account institutional demands within a context of integral growth. According to López (2021), an advantage of this view is that the overvaluation of academic performance justifies investment in education and the demand for improvements in resources and teaching quality.

Integral education seeks to prepare students for life, promoting competencies aiding their participation in social and cultural life— desirable dimensions that schools are expected to foster. In other words, school success and failure depend on students’ actions and their ability to live in society. However, in themselves they do not justify decisions that are key to strategic development of the institution and its educational project. This dualistic approach, which

polarizes academic performance and integral growth, limits the understanding of reality as experienced in the school environment, as it prioritizes one aspect at the expense of the other.

In light of the two previous approaches, recognizing that an understanding of academic performance requires moving beyond traditional dichotomies is essential. This entails adopting perspectives that transcend causal or unidirectional thinking, viewing performance as a complex phenomenon influenced by multiple dimensions existing both inside and outside the classroom. Among these dimensions, social, cultural, institutional, and family dimensions stand out as key to explaining academic performance (Alarcón, Piña, García, & Tejedor, 2019).

A holistic understanding of academic success and failure starts from the premise that neither can be reduced to a list of quantitative achievements attained by the student or the school (Carrillo, Civís, Blanch, Longás Mayayo, & Riera, 2018). Instead, the focus should be on qualitative gains related to the development of competencies across various dimensions of life. This broader perspective on the notion of success and failure goes beyond the student and extends responsibility for its construction to parents, teachers, and the educational system as a whole. This integral vision is consistent with the guidelines of Catholic education, which promote a formation oriented toward the full development of the person in all its dimensions.

II. Methodology

This study is exploratory and descriptive in nature, and it was carried out using a sequential mixed model, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches.

1. Participants

Through purposive sampling, eight Catholic schools recognized by the Ministry of Education were selected: four in Santiago and four in Temuco. Once the schools were selected, one administrator and one teacher from each school were interviewed (15 men and 17 women). Subsequently, 271 parents/guardians and 714 secondary students completed a questionnaire. Their characteristics are detailed in the following table

Table 1: Description of Parents/Guardians and Student Participants

Factor	Category	Parents/Guardians		Students	
		N	%	N	%
Gender	Female	210	78	278	39
	Male	61	22	423	59
	Other			13	2
Age	Mean (SD)	47.6 (6.3)		15.5 (1.1)	
	Range Min–Max	35-63		13-19	

Religious affiliation	Catholic	206	76	458	64
	Other (non-Catholic)	18	7	41	6
	None	47	17	215	30

Source: authors own preparation

2. Data Collection and Analysis

Two instruments were applied: semi-structured interviews with administrators and teachers, and a questionnaire for parents/guardians and students. Data collection was carried out between March and June 2023, with the approval of the Ethics Committee. Prior to this, assent and informed consent were obtained in accordance with its guidelines. The characteristics of each instrument are detailed below.

a) Interviews with Administrators and Teachers

To explore the notions of school success and failure, an individual semi-structured interview validated by experts was applied. The interview inquired into the following dimensions: characteristic elements of the school; student indicators associated with the institution’s distinctive identity; recognition of students; conceptions of the good and bad student; and indicators associated with school success and failure, as well as remedial measures in the face of failure.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically, according to Braun and Clarke (2006). The procedure involved an exploratory and independent analysis of the responses by two of the authors and identification of initial thematic codes. Subsequently, these codes were grouped into central themes, and the researchers sought to reach consensus and calibration in terms of those themes present in the responses.

b) Questionnaire

For purposes of exploring the notions of school success and failure, a questionnaire was designed specifically for this study. The instrument contains 20 positive qualities or characteristics of a student. Participants evaluate, one by one, the extent to which these characteristics correspond to a successful student. Responses are given on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Strongly disagree that this characteristic corresponds to a successful student, to 4 = Strongly agree.

The 20 characteristics (items) are classified into three dimensions (factors), detailed below:

Dimension 1. Academic performance and school attitudes. This includes characteristics related to academic development, active participation in school, and adjustment to curricular and extracurricular demands, highlighting social-emotional skills.

Dimension 2. Social commitment and personal attitudes. This dimension reflects students’ connection with their social environment, their positive impact on the community, and their civic sense of responsibility beyond the school. It also includes aspects of positive interpersonal relationships.

Dimension 3. Religiosity. This dimension represents characteristics associated with the Catholic faith and with spirituality.

The characteristics (items) were validated by experts who examined content validity using the Individual Aggregates Method (Galicia, Balderrama, & Edel, 2017) and how these characteristics corresponded to their dimension. In addition, a confirmatory factor analysis was conducted for the purpose of confirming that the characteristics corresponded to the three dimensions under study. It is important to note that this analysis yielded a KMO index of 0.943 ($p = .000$) and that components explained 65.58% of the variance. These values indicate a strong psychometric robustness.

The results were analyzed using frequency analysis. In addition, a Chi-square test of statistical difference was conducted to compare the responses of students with those of parents/guardians.

Table 2: Results of the Exploratory Factor Analysis of the 16 Items

Factors	Components / Factor Loadings*		
	I	II	III
Dimension 1: Academic performance and school attitudes			
High academic achievement	.866		
Concerned about academic performance	.850		
Responsible	.827		
Organized	.714		
Committed to his/her school	.691		
Respectful	.643		
Autonomous	.590		
Has clear life goals	.565		
Participates in school activities (workshops, sports, etc.)	.485		
Dimension 2: Social commitment and personal attitudes			
Humble		.806	
Happy		.797	
Entertaining		.765	
Solidary		.674	
Fair		.669	
Flexible		.650	
Close to others		.616	

Committed to the country's problems	.607
Dimension 3: Religiosity	
Close to the Catholic Church	:931
Believes in God	.919
Interested in spiritual development	.687

*Extraction method: Analysis of main components. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization.

Source: authors' own preparation.

III. Results

The results presented below seek to answer the central question of this article: How is school success understood in Catholic schools? The mixed-methods approach of this study provides findings that offer insights into how Catholic confessional schools understand success and failure, emphasizing the voices of those directly involved—students, parents/guardians, teachers, and administrators.

III.1. Notions of School Success from Teachers and Administrators

Four key notions linked to success emerge from the discourse of the teachers and administrators interviewed, ranging from centrality of the student to the influence of macro-level factors such as those shaped by public policy. These are later described through indicators and actions aimed at school success from the perspectives of administrators and parents/guardians. The findings are presented below.

a. Academic Success Beyond Good Grades

For teachers and administrators, student success results from the achievement of a series of factors associated with learning. First, they emphasize the need not to dissociate achievement—understood as “good grades” certifying student learning—from aspects that contribute to a less partial and more comprehensive formative education, such as, for example, the moral and social dimensions of the educational process. In this sense, they expect that by the end of their educational journey, students “in addition to obtaining good grades, may also possess values such as solidarity, perseverance, respect, and honesty” (Teacher, Male, School 3), thereby promoting positive relationships and the common good.

It is often members of the educational community who highlight the importance of persistence and discipline in understanding academic success and in facing the challenges of school. This broadens the understanding of what the educational institution is expected to accomplish through the formative process, embracing the idea of an institution that not only qualifies but also socializes.

“There are people who get very good grades by being very perseverant and methodical, and that is very good. Maybe there are others who might have a lower average than the rest, but who give their all, and that is perfectly fine too. In the end, what matters is that you give your

best effort, that you are perseverant, that you are methodical, that you have habits—whether sports, social, artistic... That, at its core, it is a whole and not just one area. I think that is super important.” (Teacher, Male, School 3).

What is emphasized includes the importance of forming “good people” beyond the years of schooling, extending this expectation to graduation and integration into society, as reflected in the following quote.

“I think, first of all, that the kids finish high school. That they obtain their secondary school diplomas, that they achieve professional fulfillment, but also that they become good people. I believe that is the most important achievement. That they be good people, because what we provide is an integral formative education, both in values—so that they become good people—as well as in content, but the most important thing is that they be a good person.” (Teacher, Female, School 4).

What is expressed in this last statement is reiterated in the discourse of teachers and administrators: the understanding of who students are as persons, with the expectation that they may become “good people.” This leads to a second notion of success, one that particularly involves the teaching practice.

b. Success Requires Understanding Students as Persons

The premise outlined here translates into an approach that attentively considers students’ world, their needs and struggles, seeking their well-being across a wide spectrum of factors that extends from empathizing with others to addressing emotional needs.

“So, the first action that the school and teachers generally undertake is commitment to students’ education and to seeing them as persons. I think that is a premise which, perhaps, I have not seen in other schools; rather, it is about acknowledging that we are working with persons, and that is what is essential, what comes first. That is why there is so much concern about ensuring that students are well.” (Administrator, Male, School 2).

Once again, when consulted, they emphasized the importance of balancing academic demands with socio-emotional needs, which are considered essential for a truly successful education.

“Making them feel that they are well, caring about that, attending to it—even primarily in the strictly socio-emotional sense first. And then, secondly, during preparation and... and taking time to plan academic activities and... also being realistic, right? [...] Understanding that we cannot squeeze a student until they are wrung out because, on the other hand, as said colloquially, we are going to break them emotionally. So, I believe that in the school there is both this concern, and also the effort to create a balance between emotional well-being and academic work.” (Teacher, Female, School 2).

This aspect—concern for the student’s well-being as a person—is also expressed in relation with the educational community as a whole, and especially with regard to teachers, who are key actors in the interaction with young people undergoing formative education. This way, they value the freedom they have within their educational communities to develop their lesson plans and the support they receive from school authorities.

“What we have here is freedom. That’s what we have—it’s a freedom for us as teachers to develop whatever comes to mind, really, whatever comes to mind. There is a lot of trust from the administration toward us. So, if I say, ‘Look, I want to take the kids to the supermarket,’ they say, ‘Go ahead, go...’” (Teacher, Male, School 6).

According to those interviewed, the above translates into higher levels of teacher commitment, which in turn brings about the success of their students. In other words, an educational community is successful if

“... people feel they are not only working, but exercising a vocation of service, and therefore are characterized not only by responding to what is exclusively work-related, but also by working to deepen the value of the person, being welcoming, and concerned.” (Administrator, Female, School 5).

The above will only be possible if there is genuine commitment on the part of the school’s teachers.

c. Academic Success Linked to National Tests

The interviewees include in their understanding of success the results associated with standardized tests, which they regard as an objective, reliable, and easily comparable indicator, in contrast with other, far less objective dimensions related to the successful development of an educational project. Therefore, such results provide the school with information for subsequent analysis in making relevant decisions for the student body.

“Wow, well, I can’t ignore reality. And the most important indicator of success for the school is... academic achievement, in terms of the university entrance exams. I mean, it would be absurd to deny that... when we all congratulate ourselves when our kids... achieve everything they want.” (Teacher, Male, School 5).

Even within this broad framework of standardized tests, the decrease in school dropout rates is also considered an indicator of the academic success of the educational institution, ratifying the good work of the educational community—and of teachers in particular—in capturing students’ interest and keeping them within institutional bounds.

“...we have been reducing dropout. I think it has been very important, as an educational project, to accompany the other aspects of the problems they face (...) background factors that are very important, and that... also little by little, we have been raising all the scores on the SIMCE national standardized test and all the harder indicators.” (Administrator, Male, School 7).

d. Success Viewed from the Social and the Internal Point of View

A pre-conception of school success that, although not present in most of the schools consulted, is nonetheless interesting, includes successful school processes both in terms of who defines this (external perspective) and from what location they are defined (internal perspective).

From an external perspective, when students’ progress as expected, achieve good performance, develop an adequate moral formation, and gain access to higher education in their desired field of study, they can be considered to have achieved school success.

“Well, if we refer to the external part—which we do not necessarily share, but which speaks of the recognition of success today in social terms—it means students who obtain the scores they expect and who enter the university world, in the careers they want and in the places where they want to study, most of them, right? In that sense, they are successful.” (Teacher, Male, School 3).

The internal perspective (the point of view of the teachers) values students’ happiness, high levels of self-acceptance, and their ability to actively connect with others. An illustrative quote follows:

“That the student has values, that he/she is an integrally developed person. So, this other element goes beyond recognized learning, and is also seen as a valued factor of success, let’s say, outwardly. Internally, for us success is seeing kids, young persons, children who are happy. That is the first...the first indicator for us: that they are happy. That you see them developing in a good way, that they accept themselves, that they care for others, and that this allows them to live in freedom. And a happy kid is usually one who learns better, who achieves development in other areas—pastoral, sports, recreational, artistic—in a better way. So, when we arrive at a teachers’ meeting and we see these kids, we say, ‘Look, it’s fine. They are moving forward in a good way.’ Those are factors of success that make us say, well, we are on the right track.” (Teacher, Male, School 3).

e. Indicators and Actions for School Success

In concluding this section on pre-conceptions of success, interviewees offer diverse indicators that address different areas of action within the educational institution, incorporating central aspects of the formative process. The first points to the student’s interest in coming to and being present in class (Teacher, Female, School 8).

The second focuses on students who have made an effort to achieve a goal and actually accomplish it (Administrator, School 3).

The third is related to having good habits—life habits, eating habits, sports habits. “I believe that habits reflect much of who they are, not only at school but also at home” (Teacher, School 4).

The fourth is that students are happy in what they do (Administrator, School 8).

Finally, the fifth is linked to academic achievement, which does not exclude value-based formative education: “In this same school, at the end of the year two categories are always created, one on the academic side and another on the side of values. And sometimes it happens that someone has both, but in fact it really happens that they have both. Yet the indicator of achievement is clearly either that they live out the values promoted by the school or that they have good grades.” (Teacher, Female, School 2).

In terms of action mentioned by schools aimed at achieving success in student personal development, the following stands out: first, focusing on the person; second, encouraging sports; third, developing personal talents; and finally, getting to know the student-family.

Regarding the first action, the aim for the different members of the educational community is to place the student as a human being at the center and treat him/her with respect. This includes fostering a culture of respectful treatment of all students, avoiding conflicts or

mistreatment both among students and between students and teachers. The following quote illustrates this action:

“It is always more important to focus on the student than on what he/she is studying—in other words, be more concerned with the person than with what the person is going to learn. If you focus on that, a student will learn more, will learn better, and we will do well academically. So, we try—and at least I personally always try—to promote respect as the foundation for... something that today is not easy. It might seem super obvious, but it is complex. Above all, because school communities have shifted toward behaviors that are not necessarily respectful, where competition takes over and rights are demanded in disrespectful ways. That generates conflict, but we must uphold that conduct of respect. So, for me, a central matter is precisely that: taking into account the person.” (Administrator, Male, School 4).

The second action aimed at achieving academic success is to encourage students' participation in sports, since this experience is also an area of personal growth and an opportunity to improve coexistence across different educational levels.

“...so you can participate in school life with older students, with younger students. There are a series of things that happen in sports— such as going out, traveling, welcoming, hosting people in your home—and all of this weaves together a style of relationship that I believe helps relationships at school to improve, and helps people understand that it is possible to coexist with different types of people... At least I believe this contributes to what you consider to be a successful student. There is no use in having a national score if they are unruly, if they don't believe in anything, if they couldn't care less about the person next to them. I believe that this would be a failure of education.” (Administrator, Female, School 2).

The third type of action is to explore personal talents, considering that not all students will achieve excellence in performance. However, we postulate (Catholic education postulates?) that each person brings something valuable to contribute, and if we as teachers discover and strengthen that thing, then the educational institution has also fulfilled its mission of educating good persons. The following quote illustrates this code:

“When we talk about academic excellence, we are not only talking about straight A's but also about considering personal possibilities, because not everyone can reach that level of excellence understood to be represented by good grades. Something can be of very high quality even if the performance is lower, as long as the student is doing his/her best. So, the aim is for teachers to understand that we cannot have students with only straight A's. (...) Each one will contribute in the area they can and in which they have talent, and will get close to those ideals according to his/her possibilities. I believe that in the end God does not leave us out, like you are either in or out; I believe He is much more merciful than that, and therefore sometimes allows us to be closer or farther away, and I think we also need to pass this on to students in their lives.” (Teacher, Female, School 1).

Finally, the fourth type of action is to get to know the student–family. As its name suggests, this key action involves getting to know students and their families in depth by generating various opportunities to meet with them, such as:

“parent and student interviews that are quite regular, they are held consistently, and when a problem arises there is also a lot of support from the school provided through cultivation of school coexistence (área de convivencia escolar). So, there is always much conversation with

the parents, who are, always being called to come to school to discuss certain situations. In general, that is something that helps us a lot—that the father, in this case, or the mother is present at the school.” (Teacher, Male, School 2).

IV.2. Notions of School Success from the Point of View of Students and Parents/Guardians

Students and parents/guardians responded to a questionnaire that included 20 positive characteristics or qualities of a student. They were asked whether each characteristic corresponds to a “successful student.” Participants responded using a Likert scale ranging from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree” that a given characteristic corresponds to a successful student. The general results are presented in Table 3. In addition, a Chi-square test of statistical difference was conducted to compare the responses of students and parents/guardians. The value of “p” is reported in the rightmost column.

Table 3 Results of the section “A Successful Student Is”

Characteristics	Parents/Guardians [n = 271]				Students [n = 714]				p
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
DIMENSION 1: ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE									
High academic achievement	7%	7%	35%	51%	8%	13%	38%	42%	0,01
Concerned about academic performance	7%	4%	35%	54%	8%	18%	38%	36%	<.001
Responsible	7%	3%	25%	66%	13%	25%	36%	26%	<.001
Organized	7%	6%	40%	47%	10%	18%	39%	34%	<.001
Committed to school	7%	7%	41%	46%	7%	3%	23%	68%	<.001
Respectful	7%	3%	19%	72%	6%	3%	24%	67%	0,397
Autonomous	7%	6%	35%	52%	9%	19%	35%	37%	<.001
Participates in other activities	9%	10%	46%	35%	20%	27%	28%	25%	<.001
DIMENSION 2: SOCIAL COMMITMENT									
Humble	10%	14%	40%	37%	6%	15%	46%	35%	0,318
Fair	8%	13%	31%	48%	7%	9%	37%	48%	0,127
Solidary	7%	10%	26%	58%	8%	28%	37%	27%	<.001
Close to others	6%	14%	38%	42%	7%	29%	46%	29%	<.001

Committed to the country	11%	32%	41%	15%	21%	29%	27%	23%	<.001
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DIMENSION 3: RELIGIOSITY

Close to the Catholic Church	11%	31%	34%	24%	7%	11%	42%	40%	<.001
Believes in God	11%	27%	35%	27%	7%	8%	40%	45%	<.001
Spiritual	9%	23%	40%	28%	6%	10%	34%	54%	<.001

1: GL =12; 2: GL= 9;
3:GL =21; 4: GL =3

*p=.05**p=.01***p<.001

Source: prepared by author

The above table shows that, for parents/guardians, the three main characteristics of a successful student are, to be respectful, responsible, and solidary. In the case of “respectful,” the percentage of responses is similar between parents/guardians and students ($p = .397$), 91% of both groups indicating that they “agree” or “strongly agree” that being respectful defines a successful student. In the case of responsibility, 91% of parents/guardians value it, compared to 62% of students, a difference that is statistically significant ($p < .001$). Finally, parents/guardians place solidarity in third place, where statistically significant differences are also reported ($p < .001$): 84% of parents/guardians versus 64% of students state that they “agree” or “strongly agree.”

When considering students’ responses, the three main preferences are being committed to the school, being responsible, and being happy. With respect to commitment to the school, 46% of parents/guardians and 68% of students indicated that they “agree” or “strongly agree” with this characteristic, a difference that is statistically significant ($p < .001$). As for “happy” as an attribute of a successful student, 61% of students valued it with “strongly agree,” compared to 43% of parents/guardians, also marking a statistically significant difference ($p < .001$).

From the perspective of a second level of analysis, and beyond the main preferences for both groups, we observe that characteristics such as “academic performance” generate consensus, with no significant differences between them but with a shared valuation as an attribute of a successful student. A similar situation occurs with “high academic achievement,” where differences favor parents/guardians over students, although both groups value such achievement: 89% of parents/guardians and 74% of students indicate that they at least “agree.”

For characteristics associated with a confessional school, such as being “close to the Church,” there are significant differences between groups, with higher degree of agreement among students (82%) than among parents/guardians (58%). The same is true for “believes in God” (85% of students versus 62% of parents/guardians). In the case of “spiritual,” 88% of students and 68% of parents/guardians “agree” or “strongly agree” that this characteristic defines success. These differences are also significant ($p < .001$).

On this line, “fair” receives a low number of responses, similar between parents/guardians. On the other hand, “committed to the country’s problems” shows differences that favor parents/guardians, although both groups express a low valuation of this quality (“agree” or “strongly agree” expressed by 56% of parents/guardians and 50% by students). The opinion of both groups tends to coincide in the case of “modest”: 77% of parents/guardians and 78% of students “agree” or “strongly agree” that this characteristic defines a successful student. Among the attributes of a Christian anthropology “close to others” exhibits different qualifications: parents/guardians “strongly agree” (42%) favor this quality, whereas students do so with “agree” (46%). This difference is also significant ($p < .001$).

Dimensions such as “organized”, “clear goals”, and “flexible show similar preferences between the two groups, with a higher valuation on the part of students.

In opposition to the foregoing, “participates in other activities” is valued more highly by parents/guardians than by students”.

V. Discussion

This study initially posed the question: How do Catholic schools understand academic success? By way of conclusion, we will attempt to answer this question based on three points of tension (conflict?) formulated as guiding questions on the subject.

a. Good Grades or Well-Developed?

When asked what is understood by academic success, and considering the binomial “good grades” or “well-developed,” those consulted leave no room for questioning an understanding of academic achievement that integrates the complexities and points of tension (conflict?) between academic development and other formative dimensions. The latter considerations go beyond what the interviewees themselves define as “good grades,” placing emphasis on the centrality of the person and integral vision of the same, characteristic of the Christian perspective. Administrators and educators in Catholic schools share this position; however, when faced with the dilemma of choosing between students with good grades or well-educated students, the balance tips toward qualifying their students—or, in other words, toward what they describe as educating them to “be good people.”

It is precisely the option for a person-centered education that leads schools—and particularly their teachers and administrators—to adopt practices and strategies aimed at considering the student as someone who transcends the mere attainment of achievements. Among these actions are recognizing the other (knowing their names, family circumstances, challenges, and concerns, among others) and adopting a pedagogical approach that begins with the students’ emotional needs, which must be met in order to enable any instructional process.

The necessary balance in addressing students’ needs beyond the academic dimension is key for this educational subsector. However, although it can be highly beneficial, it also represents a challenge for schools with greater socioeconomic deprivation, which must focus resources and therefore prioritize. In these cases, personal needs that contribute to learning are often relegated in the light of this perceived tension (conflict?). Educational actors in more economically precarious Catholic institutions tend to justify weaker academic performance based on this (conflict?) tension and on how, as schools, they prioritize the personal needs of

their students in order to promote better and broader learning—often drawing on a Gospel-based logic: “to serve the most disadvantaged.”

The perspectives, decisions, and strategies that schools employ to address this problem are useful for understanding the complexities of this subsector of the educational system. Nevertheless, regardless of the courses of action, the conjunction “and” must be considered the most characteristic element of Catholicism in its universality: successful and well-developed.

The centrality of the institution’s role, as attributed by the participants consulted, stands out. In line with what has already been discussed, the school not only grants credentials or certifies knowledge, but must also consider other formative dimensions, such as being a good citizen, collaborating with others, and acting as a good Christian in a complex world. This transcends the time students spend in school and is projected beyond graduation. This centrality in educating children and young people has been proclaimed by the Church since *Gravissimum Educationis*: “true education is directed toward the formation of the human person in view of his/her ultimate end and of the welfare of the societies of which he/she is a member” (no. 1). It is noteworthy to recognize closeness of the Catholic schools consulted to key points of the magisterium.

b) Is the Catholic School an Institution that Forms Happy Students?

The question of students’ happiness is central in this type of institution and constitutes an interesting indicator for educational systems in other countries. Nevertheless, although these schools declare happiness to be a central objective, this does not always translate into concrete curricular proposals or educational projects. Thus, how can the Catholic school promote joy among its students? We are speaking of a joy that is a true part of being a Christian, reflecting the reality of the Gospel as good news.

It is important to highlight that happiness figures among the top three preferences of students when asked what it means to be a successful student. However, this concept appears as a general term, without a clearly defined content. While it is emphasized that students should be happy, there is little elaboration on what this happiness consists of or how it might be achieved. In this sense, the absence of a “formative education in happiness” may be due to the lack of a concrete content for said term.

It is paradoxical that, for parents and guardians, happiness does not hold the same centrality. Even though teachers and administrators mention this aspect, it is often presented in opposition or in conflict with academic achievement as it is traditionally understood—that is, grades and good results on standardized tests. In other words, students want the Catholic school to be a place where they are educated to be happy in an integral way, which does not always coincide with the vision of those who make decisions within the educational institution.

c) Forming Students Committed to the Church and to the World?

Although integral formative education is essential in this type of institution, it is students—more than parents or guardians—who highly value dimensions such as being a believer, being spiritual, and being close to the Church. However, the adults who hold decision-making power in the schools do not prioritize these aspects. While students consider these characteristics fundamental to student success, parents and guardians emphasize “high

academic achievement” as being the priority. Where is the world of adults in schools in the face of these student demands? This contradiction reflects a disconnection between the two groups.

The issue becomes more complex when aspects of life that are crucial from a Christian point of view lose value for parents, guardians, and even in the sphere of teachers and administrators, where they are not explicitly emphasized. Justice and closeness to others appear diminished among all groups. It is worth asking whether the common good is not built upon these dimensions. One would expect the Catholic school to actively promote the common good through the practice of justice.

Finally, by way of conclusion, one must consider how highly desirable it is that members of an institution speak of such key aspects of education as school success and failure. The question that is projected into the future is whether these findings extend to secular schools, being essential to the work of schooling itself beyond the meaning of a confessional identity, or whether they are unique to it.

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Declaración de contribución de los autores

Patricia Imbarack Dagach: diseño de la investigación, desarrollo de la conceptualización teórica, diseño de la estrategia metodológica, análisis de resultados, redacción del artículo

Naiomi Vera Merino: conceptualización teórica, validación del diseño metodológico y de los resultados cualitativos. Contribución a la redacción del artículo.

Guillermo Zamora: conceptualización teórica, validación del diseño metodológico y de los resultados cuantitativos. Contribución a la redacción del artículo.

Declaración de conflicto de intereses

Los autores declaran que no existe ningún conflicto de intereses.

Declaración de disponibilidad de los datos de investigación

El conjunto de datos que apoya los resultados de este estudio se publicó en el propio artículo.

Declaración de uso de IA

No se han utilizado herramientas de inteligencia artificial.

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