



## ***From Values to Action: Mission Statements of Catholic Elementary Schools***

### **ABSTRACT**

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**RESEARCH OBJECTIVE:** The aim of this text is to call attention to the Catholic school mission statements. The interest in Catholic schools has been growing for several years now. During the past few decades, the interest in the issue of mission statements has also strongly increased. However, in Poland, empirical studies investigating the mission of the school (Christian or non-Christian) are very rare.

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**THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS:** The main purpose of the study is to document the content of the mission statement of Catholic elementary schools to better understand how they define their goals and prioritize the values which should guide their action. The particular objectives of this study are to investigate: 1) the format of mission statements; 2) the words used at the micro-level in order to determine schools' core values. In order to achieve these objectives, the method of document analysis was used.

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**THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION:** The text consists of two main parts: the first provides a theoretical background. On the basis of literature review, a conceptual framework for the study is defined. In the second part, the methodology and the results of the study are presented.

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**RESEARCH RESULTS:** School mission statements highlight the broad range of values and goals that the Catholic schools pursue. The goals take a form of institutional goals, goals for instructors, and goals for students and parents as well. The analysis also revealed the predominance of interpersonal values in school mission statements. Interestingly, two types of school mission statements are observed: one more exclusive and the other type of mission statement that indicates the openness for students with diverse philosophical backgrounds.

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**CONCLUSION, INNOVATION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS:** School mission statements could be a source of data for comparing Catholic schools both nationwide and abroad.

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→ **KEYWORDS:** **MISSION STATEMENT, SCHOOL GOALS AND VALUES,  
THE CATHOLIC SCHOOL, DOCUMENT ANALYSIS**

## STRESZCZENIE

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*Od wartości do działań: misja katolickich szkół podstawowych*

**CEL NAUKOWY:** Celem artykułu jest zwrócenie uwagi na misję szkoły katolickiej. Od kilku lat obserwuje się wzrost zainteresowania badaczy szkolnictwem katolickim. Na przestrzeni kilku ostatnich dekad wyraźnie zwiększyło się też zainteresowanie problematyką misji organizacji. Niemniej jednak, w Polsce wciąż brakuje opracowań empirycznych dedykowanych misji szkoły, również szkoły działającej w duchu wartości chrześcijańskich.

**PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE:** Głównym celem badań jest eksploracja misji katolickich szkół podstawowych służąca identyfikacji zasadniczych kierunków dążeń i wartości uznanych przez te szkoły za fundamentalne. Szczegółowe cele działań badawczych są następujące: 1) analiza formy deklaracji programowych badanych szkół, 2) mikroanaliza treści misji z intencją wyodrębnienia słów opisujących wartości najważniejsze dla danej społeczności szkolnej. Aby urzeczywistnić te cele, posłużono się metodą analizy dokumentów.

**PROCES WYWODU:** Publikacja składa się z dwóch części. Pierwsza ma charakter teoretyczny i tworzy podstawę do prezentacji problematyki badań. W drugiej części omówiono założenia badawcze oraz przedstawiono wyniki analizy materiału empirycznego.

**WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ:** Analiza założeń misji badanych szkół katolickich ujawniła różnorodność wartości i celów deklarowanych przez te szkoły. W badanych dokumentach zidentyfikowano następujące kategorie celów: cele instytucjonalne, cele dedykowane nauczycielom, cele odnoszące się wprost do uczniów, cele dedykowane rodzicom. Analiza pokazała również dominację wartości interpersonalnych w treści badanych dokumentów. Co ciekawe, wyszczególniono dwa rodzaje misji: posłannictwo szkoły zdefiniowane bardziej ekskluzywnie oraz deklaracje nacechowane otwartością na uczniów wyznających różny światopogląd, nie tylko chrześcijański.

**WNIOSKI, INNOWACJE, REKOMENDACJE:** Misja szkoły może być cennym źródłem danych na temat organizacji szkolnej. Analiza deklaracji programowych szkół katolickich dostarcza podstaw do tworzenia interesujących porównań tych szkół.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** MISJA, WARTOŚCI I CELE SZKOŁY, SZKOŁA KATOLICKA, ANALIZA DOKUMENTÓW

## Introduction

A mission is a broad goal based on the organization's planning premises, basic assumptions about the organization's purpose, its values and its place in the world. An effective mission serves both as a framework for decision making and building relationships within any organization, including schools. A vacuum is created when the school lacks of clear purpose and shared values (Arth et al., 1987). Nowadays, educational researchers

(e.g. Stemler & Bebell, 2012) draw attention to the importance of school mission statement as tool for defining those elements that are most highly valued in the school local and broader context.

Catholic schools are usually managed by and/or serving a local church diocese, community, or a private organization. These schools are typically housed philosophically with a Catholic church (Stemler & Bebell, 2012). Some authors (e.g. Chrobak, 2015; Zakrzewska, 2015; Cichosz, 2016) suggest that Catholic schools are the places of integral education. However, it is important to examine the Catholic schools' perspective on their actual role and purpose. Thus, my main intentions were to reflect on the notion and the value of the mission of the school organization, and to investigate Catholic elementary schools' mission statement. I focused on its key elements, such as goals and values, and its format as well. I used the method of document analysis.

## 1. Literature review

### 1.1. A few remarks on mission statements in organizations

The construct of "mission statement" is commonly known and used in normal speech. It is often referred to the personal objectives or priorities (DuFour, 1997). The mission statement have been associated with the strategic planning process in non-profits organizations and/or for-profit corporations. But in fact, any entity that shares common goals and values – from a family unit to university departments – can successfully generate, utilize and develop a mission statement (Firmin & Gilson, 2010).

In the management sciences, the formulation of mission is seen as the starting point for establishing business objectives, strategies and market programs of their realization (Czubala, 2013). According to Leggat and Holmes (2015), mission statements can provide a sense of purpose, define behavioral standards, foster employee identification with their organization, give greater definition to the interests of external stakeholders, inspire employees, refocus the organization during a crisis or improve the resource allocation and control processes.

An organization's mission can be defined as a set of value, beliefs and norms of behavior shared by its members that influence employees' preference and behavior (Ganu, 2013). According to Ekpe et al. (2015), it is the "cultural glue" which ensures unanimity of purpose within the organization across all levels and generations of the firm's employee.

Nowadays, it is undisputed that an effective mission statement can help organizations realize their priorities including growth and profitability (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). However, there is a small body of empirical research which demonstrate a correlation between mission statement and organization's performance (e.g. Rarick & Vitton, 1995). Alternatively, there are some scholars who argue against the effectiveness of a mission to organizational performance (e.g. David, 1989).

## 1.2. From vision to mission: why is school mission important?

School vision and mission statements are an explicit indication of a school's priorities. They provide schools with direction (Allen et al., 2017). School vision and mission statements "arise from a set of values that answer fundamental questions about the purpose of education and how the educational programs should be carried out" (Boerema, 2006, p. 182).

Developing strong vision and mission can help school stakeholders reach a common understanding. Mission statement gives educators motivation and provides parents with a clearer picture of what the school values. Making some simplification, it can be said that if the vision statements are the "who we want to be" statements, mission statements are the "how-to" statements or action plans that help schools achieve their vision. They prompt change and development. The mission is the touch point that can help determine whether what should be happening is really happening (Gabriel & Farmer, 2009). It is usually a brief – one page or less – narrative that defines the focus and purpose of the school.

Many studies on school effectiveness (e.g. Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000) show that a shared mission statement is one of the key factors differentiating more effective schools from less effective schools. According to some scholars, the school mission can serve to represent the core philosophy and working ethos of a school. The others argue that the mission provides a straightforward and accessible indicator of a school cultural values, but it is not the only indicator of such values (see Stemler et al., 2011).

However, despite the prominent role that mission statement plays in education, and despite the long tradition of commentary on the topic of school purpose (Stemler & Bebell, 2012) it has rarely been studied in detail. In Poland, the issue of school mission statement was raised by such authors as: Elsner (2003), Pilch (2007), Polak (2007), Kordziński (2012) or Dernowska (2016; 2018). However, the lack of holistic, in-depth investigation in this area is still noticeable.

## 1.3. Elements in mission statements: the role of school values

According to some researchers (Arth et al., 1987), there are four elements common to all school mission statements. First, a statement of purpose. Every organization defines its *reason for being*, its charter, the reason it exists. Another words, a statement of purpose tells why the organization exists. Second, an indication of uniqueness. Mission statements signal that the organization's efforts are somehow unique and that this institution is distinguished from the others with similar curricula. Thus, schools are known by their differences, not by their similarities. Third, an explicit statement of commitment. The unity of purpose is not enough without the active engagement and assistance of the whole school community. Thus, without the sense of common purpose and clearly determinated tasks, the mission is more of a hope than a promise. Fourth and finally,

a clear value position. Mission statements must reflect a clear sense of the school's core values. These fundamental values will guide individual behavior as well as institutional practices (Arth et al., 1987).

In an organization, values have at least a double role: internal and external. Internally, they strengthen the members' sense of belonging, and externally, they develop the organization's image and sustainability strategies (Anderson & Jamison, 2015). Elliott points out that the ethos of a particular school could reflect one of a variety of moral and spiritual preferences. It is an imperative in an educational system reconstructed as a market where schools "sell" their "goods" to clients such as students, parents and even employers. But knowledge and skills are not the only goods "for sale" in the education market. The school has an important role in promoting moral and spiritual values through students' experience of its culture, climate or ethos. Moreover, the school is required to manufacture the moral glue which sticks individuals together in communities and prevents outbreaks of anti-social behavior (Elliott, 1994). It is worth to refer at this point to the results of research conducted by the Australian researchers. Allen and colleagues (2018) analyzed the vision and mission statements of secondary schools in Victoria (public, Catholic, and independent; N = 308) and identified 10 common school values: academic motivation, personal characteristics, school belonging, teacher support, other support, mental health promotion, the school environment, Christianity, future focus, and individual needs. It is important to stress that "personal characteristics", "belonging," and "Christianity" were more frequent in Catholic than in other school types.

In Poland, some researchers (e.g. Smak, 2014) point out that Catholic schools offer a certain model of relations among teachers, students and parents. Pasierbek & Marek highlight that various relationships with oneself, with other person, with environment, and also with the Transcendence notably decided about the correctness of moral education processes. They stress that the pedagogical meaning of relation, especially the relation with the Transcendence, was mainly based on the assumption that a human being only in God could look for a sense of life, the hierarchy of values, and the sense and the essence of being a person and, as a consequence of forming one's own identity and subjectivity (Pasierbek & Marek, 2006).

## 2. About research

### 2.1. Aim of the study

The main purpose of the study was to document the content of the mission statement of Catholic elementary schools to better understand how they define their goals and prioritize the values which should guide their action.

The particular objectives of this study were: (1) to investigate the format of mission statements; (2) to explore the words used at the micro-level in order to determine the Catholic elementary schools' core values.

## 2.2. Method

### *Sample*

I used a set of documents from Catholic elementary schools (CESs) in the Central Poland (the Mazowieckie and Łódzkie Provinces). The source for the data on these schools was the Catholic Schools Council's web site. Across 48 schools, 46 were selected. The sampling of schools was purposive, as the aim was to reach those schools whose values and goals statements are publicly available. Table 1 provides basic information on the investigated schools.

Table 1  
*Information on the schools (N = 46)*

		N
School location	City	16
	Town	14
	Rural	16
School authority	Catholic associations	18
	Religious congregations	13
	Committees or foundations	7
	Parishes	6
	Dioceses	2

### *Data collection and analysis*

Documents were acquired from each school's website. Using a documentary research model as a methodological base, the documents were analyzed at two levels: "macro-" and "micro-level". First includes both form and content of the mission statements, second one refers in particular to the substance of each document. At the micro-level of analysis aimed at identifying the values in schools' mission statements, a list of values was developed on basis of literature review. The qualitative approach was predominant. At the micro-level of analysis, a quantitative analysis was also carried out. I focused on words and phrases designating values that appeared in the texts. The frequencies that those elements occur were counted.

## 2.3. Findings

*"Macrolevelling" analysis:* according to Little (1997), mission statements should articulate *who* the school organization is, *what* it intends to do, and *for whom* it intends to do it.

I have focused on these elements during the examination of the format and substantive features of mission statements. The analysis points to the following results:

(1) *Who the school organization is?* – the majority of schools describe themselves highlighting their religious identity. They have had a strong religious component rooted in the Old and New Testaments as well as Christian values proclaimed by the Catholic Church and/or, in particular, the thoughts of John Paul II. These schools seem to be the exclusive institutions. The second group, however, were the schools that declared their openness to the students with diverse religious or philosophical beliefs. In a very few cases, school mission statements have not provided answer to the question: “who we are.” In some cases, however, when replacing the name of the school by the other, it was clear that the main point was strictly the same, that is the mission was too general and did not aptly describe the uniqueness of each place. This conclusion is particularly important in view of the fact that the mission statements should specify the school position amongst other schools with similar curricula.

(2) *What it intends to do?* – a clearly stated purpose is the *mission* of an organization as such. Based on the data analysis, it may be concluded that school mission statements highlighted the broad range of goals that the Catholic schools pursue. These goals have taken the form of:

- institutional goals (e.g. “the concern for each person development through personal formation in a physical, social, cultural, moral, and spiritual aspect”; “to encourage the integral development of individuals in the process of bringing up children, teaching and care”);
- goals for instructors (e.g. “we wish to build the man who loves God and the others, with beautiful and noble heart. (...), our intention is not only providing students with profound and multidisciplinary knowledge, but also basic moral principles – knowledge without morality harms and errs;” “adapting curricula to the individual needs of the child”);
- goals for students (e.g. “to think about themselves and about the world through the prism of faith;” “to engage in social and political life, as well as in the Catholic Church;” “to improve a sense of responsibility and learn how to enjoy the freedom”);
- goals for parents (e.g. “parents share responsibility of shaping the intellect and character of their child”).

(3) *For whom the schools intend to do it?* – the analysis revealed that the schools recognize rather what needs the institution is filling, than simply describing what services are offered. All the schools declare meeting the needs of the students, and many of them recognize the need to support students’ families or/and the need to work together on equal principles and shared values to achieve stated goals. In some cases, also teachers (and their development) and/or the needs of local community were mentioned as the addressees of school efforts. It has to be pointed out that some schools declare to serve and support Catholic families only, while the others declare their openness also for those who do not believe in God or for people who search of God and/or the sense of the life. In a few cases, the addressees of school efforts were students from multi-children families or students at risk of poverty.

*“Microlevelling” analysis:* the second objective of the study concerns on the CESs’ core values. I prepared a protocol containing 86 words and phrases for values. In total, 9 categories were developed: civic/political values (e.g. a common good, work, responsibility for words and actions, justice, responsibility for yourself and others, participation in social and political life), cultural values (e.g. art, cultural heritage, participation in culture), ecological values (e.g. nature, world), intellectual values (e.g. knowledge, skills, critical thinking, further education, learning, independent thinking and judgment), interpersonal values (e.g. mutual help, community, communication, dialogue, solidarity, cooperation, empathy, fraternity), moral values (e.g. respect, dignity, goodness, truth), patriotic values (e.g. Homeland, national identity), religious values (e.g. obedience, faith, God, holiness, transcendence), and vital values (e.g. life, health, safety, leisure). On the basis of quantitative analysis, it can be stated that the most frequently mentioned values in CESs’ mission statements were interpersonal (20 percent all the words and phrases in the protocol), followed by religious values (18 percent), and civic/political values (17 percent). The next elements were “moral” (15 percent), “intellectual” (14 percent), “patriotic” (8 percent), “cultural” (3 percent), “vital” (3 percent) and “ecological” (2 percent).

### *Discussion*

This study investigated the format and content of mission statement – its key elements – and the Catholic elementary schools’ core values. Based on the results of the analysis, it may be concluded that the majority of schools have expressed their identity by answering the questions: *who we are, what we strive to achieve and for whom we do our job*. In some cases, however, school mission statements were too general, and did not define the philosophy of thought and action of each particular school place. Interestingly, while one group of the schools were somehow exclusive in nature, the other group was welcoming to people of all religious and philosophical backgrounds. This phenomenon was also noted by the American researchers Stemler and Bebell (2012). They examined a subsample of 111 distinctive schools of different varieties, including parochial schools. They have observed that as private alternatives to public schools, Catholic schools can be found across the nearly entire American educational landscape. The researchers point out that they observed a surprising amount of diversity within the Catholic schools. Some of them took a more inclusive approach and use their mission statements to emphasize a respect for diversity and to welcome students of different faiths. In contrast, the other schools focused more singularly on their own approach, devotion, and perspective (Stemler & Bebell, 2012).

In the light of the analysis it is also clear that the schools have clearly defined their goals. According to Gurley and colleagues (2015), in goal statement educators spell out precisely what level of performance is to be achieved in the selected domain (e.g. student learning, staff development). The purpose and value of defining and developing foundational goals within school organization is not merely to have done so, and to check these objectives off of the “to do” list. It is rather to bring organizational stakeholders together

to share in a common understanding of and commitment to the school's purpose, preferred future, behavioral expectations, and next steps toward school improvement and increased levels of student learning and developing (Gurley et al., 2015). The goals identified in the investigated schools' documents took the form of institutional goals, goals for instructors, goals for students, and goals for parents as well. According to Smak (2014), one of the specific characteristic of Catholic schools is the fact that in these institutions parents play an important role: they are invited to take a part in school management, and they are rather partners than supplicants at school. Moreover, the school management focuses on creating opportunities for parents to get to know each other. It is an important step towards building mutual support and school community. In the research literature, the term community, describing relational characteristics within school organization, is closely related to the concept of belongingness (Osterman, 2000; Allen et al., 2018). Allen and colleagues (2018) point out that across 308 schools from government, independent, and Catholic sectors in Victoria, school belonging was emphasized more often by Catholic schools compared with independent and government schools.

Across the 46 Catholic school mission statements, a wide range of purposes were articulated by the schools. In this context, school mission statement is a tool by which the schools communicate their philosophy to the world. Stemler and Bebell (2012, pp. 172-173) emphasize that "schools with the most effective mission statements are going to be those that best serve their constituents, namely the students, parents, teachers, and greater community". From this point of view, the aims present in school mission statements across the investigated schools echoed the needs of the school community and the local community.

Scholars point out that one of the key characteristic of the Catholic school is a strong emphasis on values-based education as well as the high academic level that attracts not only the "church goers" (Stemler & Bebell, 2012; Smak, 2014). On the basis of the analysis at micro-level, it can be stated that the investigated schools' mission statements highlighted a broad range of values. Across these school mission statements, the most frequently observed category was interpersonal values, followed by religious and civic/political values. The least frequently cited elements were cultural, vital and ecological values.

Although we must use caution in the light of the small sample, it is interesting that interpersonal-oriented values are predominated. However, the Catholic schools are usually rooted in the principles of personalism implying a specific vision of man as well as human relations, the world, and human fate. Christian personalism, regardless of its type, is always a certain knowledge about the man (Kunowski, 2000; see also Bagrowicz & Horowski, 2012). Moreover, one of a key element of this knowledge is an assumption that *homo homini res sacra*, and everything begins with the meeting with the Other.

According to Chafas (2007), the integrated development of human being means both outer and inner change, and adjustment to life due to the acknowledged example, that is a complete personhood. It is expressed in the harmonious coordination of psychological, social, physical, cultural, and spiritual development, that should be reflected

in alignment of thoughts and acts with an objective aimed at the common good and environmental well-being. If we take a look at investigated schools' values from the viewpoint of this perspective, it will be clear that such values as vital, physical, and cultural were insufficiently underlined in mission statements across the schools. Obviously, the question arises how the values and goals impact on what actually occurs on a day-to-day basis.

This study must be considered in light of its limitations. First, the sample size was small and from only one part of Poland. I suggest that further research include a larger number of schools from different parts of the country. Moreover, the study takes the language used in the mission statement and values it at its face value. In future research, the data would be analyzed in a more sophisticated way, for example, with the supervised lexical approach. School mission statements could be a source of data for comparing Catholic or/and Christian schools nationwide and abroad as well. Additionally, the data that were collected only reflect words, not action. Thus, future scholars should consider exploring the processes for "translating" mission statements into educational practice. Further research may be also aimed at determining how people within the Catholic school perceive, discuss, and make sense of core values and purposes of their school.

## Conclusion

School mission statements cannot be mere slogans. It should create a framework for decision-making, therefore it must reflect a clear sense of the school's core values and goals. These elements will guide both individual behavior and institutional practices. Thus, mission statement should go further and deeper than just words on paper.

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