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5-28-2019

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### Recommended Citation

McGah, M. H. (2019). Instructional Practices of High School Religion Teachers. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 22 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2201032019>

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## Instructional Practices of High School Religion Teachers

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*High school religion teachers in Catholic schools are central to the mission of such schools and teach in every Catholic high school. Research on effective teaching has not traditionally included this subset of teachers. The overall purpose of this study was to research the best instructional practices for high school religion teachers in Washington State, explore how to best implement the best practices, and explore what opportunities for sharing best practices teachers currently have. The Survey of Instructional Practices (SIP) was created, piloted, revised, and administered in this study. The SIP provided information from high school religion teachers in Washington State about lessons deemed to engage students and enhance student learning, in addition to teachers' opportunities for sharing ideas on best practices for teaching high school religion.*

*The participants in this study reported on a best lesson taught in a high school religion class and many key findings emerged. The best instructional practices included: (a) discussion, (b) application to real-world situations, (c) application to student's own life, (d) questioning by teacher, (e) cooperative or collaborative learning, and (f) identifying similarities and differences. Each of these practices is highlighted in the research on best instructional practices for teachers. Furthermore, four major themes emerged for how teachers can implement these practices, which included: (a) clear guidelines and directions, (b) students engaged, (c) student-centered, and (d) students working together. Lastly, participants in the study highlighted the opportunities for sharing best practices as being informal, yet helpful and important. Overall, the findings highlight two important themes for high school religion teachers: (a) the importance of collaboration, both for students and teachers, and (b) the importance of being engaged in the learning process.*

### Keywords

High school religion; Catholic schools; instructional practices; effective teaching

**H**ow can teachers and administrators know the best instructional practices in a subject where teachers generally are not certified to teach it, where there are largely no state tests to assess it, and where there is great variation between schools in curricula and standards? Religion is just such a subject. Although there is much research on effective instructional practices, religion teachers in Catholic schools generally have been left out. As the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2005) stated, “The Catholic school’s effectiveness as a community of faith and center for evangelization and catechesis depends to a large extent on its teachers of religion” (p. 232). Bringing high school religion teachers into the conversation on effective teaching is essential for Catholic schools and the thousands of students they serve every year.

In the 2016–2017 school year there were 1,205 Catholic high schools in the United States (McDonald & Schulz, 2017) with every one of those schools teaching theology or religion. The makeup of Catholic high school religion departments varies around the country and although all students take religion classes, the preparation and training for their teachers is inconsistent (Cook, 2003). Cook (2003) explained “given the sheer number of religion teachers and the central role they play in helping American Catholic high schools fulfill their religious mission, the quality and qualifications of religion teachers in these schools carries special significance” (p. 129).

The purpose of this study was to shed light on the question of quality religion instruction in Catholic high schools. This study sought to expand the research base on effective teaching to include the subject of religion. This mixed-method study collected data on the instructional practices used in high school religion classes through teachers reporting on the instructional practices in lessons designed to promote student learning and engagement. Furthermore, this research provided data on how religion teachers can best implement instructional practices in religion classes. Research questions provided a guide for designing and conducting this research. For this study, the three research questions were:

1. What are the best instructional practices of religion teachers in Catholic high schools in Washington State?
2. How can the best instructional practices be best implemented in Catholic high school religion classes in Washington State?
3. In Washington State, what opportunities do religion teachers in Catholic high schools have for sharing best practices with colleagues, formally or informally?

## Review of Literature

### Effective Teaching

The quest to define effective teaching and name what it looks like has been a focus for educational researchers for decades. For example, the National Board for Professional Teacher Standards (1987) is a national program aimed at recognizing excellence in teaching by certifying teachers who demonstrate a high level of knowledge, skills, abilities, and commitment reflected in the following five core propositions:

1. Teachers are committed to students and their learning.
2. Teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students.
3. Teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning.
4. Teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience.
5. Teachers are members of learning communities. (pp. 3-4)

This broad description seeks to holistically define what it means to be a national board-certified teachers.

Researchers continue to grapple with a definition for teacher effectiveness. Little, Goe, and Bell (2009) recognize in a narrow sense effective teaching is about improving student learning as measured by standardized tests. Pointing out the flaws in this definition, Little et al. admit teachers are not exclusively responsible for test scores and test scores are one, limited measure of assessment. To expand the definition of teacher effectiveness, Goe, Bell, and Little (2008) give a five-point definition of teacher effectiveness. The first two areas they focus on are that teachers have high expectations and there are measurable gains for students. Examples of gains are test-based growth, regular attendance, or on-time graduation rates. The third area, focuses on instruction, highlights that effective teachers provide engaging learning opportunities and adapt teaching based on student learning. The fourth area describes that effective teachers value diversity and help students to develop as civically-minded people. Lastly, effective teachers collaborate with teachers, administrators, parents, and other educators. Thoroughly defining the characteristics and behaviors of effective teaching, Little et al. seek to help teachers and administrators define effective teaching to in turn improve instruction and the learning experience for students.

Looking at best instructional practices is one window into the world of effective teaching. As the field has developed, researchers are seeing benefits of schools and classes being “student-centered, active, experiential, democratic, collaborative, and yet rigorous and challenging” (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998, p. viii). Through variation in the instructional practices, students can become engaged, rather than bored and teachers can meet students’ diverse needs while encouraging deep learning (Campbell, 2003). Although lecture was used primarily in schools in the past, brain research has now shown most students are not primarily auditory learners (Tileston, 2000).

Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) identified nine categories of classroom instruction resulting in increased student learning. Through this research, Marzano et al. have been able to define practices teachers can incorporate into their teaching to improve student learning. Some examples of the instructional practices highlighted in their research include identifying similarities and differences, summarizing and note taking, cooperative learning, and getting objectives and providing feedback. These practices for classroom instruction outline how teachers can incorporate research-based practices into all disciplines.

### **Religious Instruction**

The methods and practices used in religious instruction are varied across disciplines and contexts. The Catholic Church recognizes the importance of religion teachers in Catholic schools and gives some guidance about pedagogy for religion teachers. For example, John Paul II (1979) stated, “the method and language used [for catechesis] must truly be means for communicating the whole and not just part of ‘the words of eternal life’ and the ‘ways of life’” (#31). More recently, the USCCB (2005) stated catechesis must

engage adolescents in the learning process by incorporating a variety of learning methods and activities through which adolescents can explore and learn important religious concepts of the Scriptures and Catholic faith—a variety of learning approaches including music and media, keeps interest alive among adolescents and responds to their different learning styles. (p. 201)

This recognition of using various methods for religious instruction can help teachers to continue to teach core Catholic teachings through many methods.

The USCCB (2005) stated the importance of having a clearly defined religion curriculum and presented a framework for high school religion courses (USCCB, 2008). This framework includes a core curriculum and electives, created to provide a Christocentric curriculum that provides opportunities for students to learn about and encounter Jesus. The six core courses are: (a) revelation of Jesus Christ in scripture; (b) who is Jesus Christ?; (c) the mission of Jesus Christ (paschal mystery); (d) Jesus Christ's mission continues in the Church; (e) sacraments as privileged encounters with Jesus Christ; and (f) life in Jesus Christ (USCCB, 2008).

### **Preparation of High School Religion Teachers**

Generally, high school religion teachers have a variety of educational backgrounds and various levels of preparation before becoming a teacher. Possessing a college degree in the subject one teaches is one way to signify adequate preparation for high school teachers in the United States. Cook and Hudson (2006) reported full-time religion teachers with an advanced degree in theology or religious studies dropped from 57% to 41% from 1985 to 2006. Another benchmark for teacher preparation is state certification. This becomes problematic for religion teachers in high schools because only Nebraska certifies religion teachers (Cook & Hudson, 2006). Cook and Hudson (2006) found 46.7% of religion teachers in their study were certified in any subject at all. "Universities which train future religion teachers in both their discipline as well as the art of teaching are rare" (Raddell, 2000) which has led to little education preparation for religion teachers.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Two overarching theoretical frameworks informed the research: appreciative inquiry and effective teaching.

#### **Appreciative Inquiry**

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a theoretical framework largely used in organization development. In this study, AI grounded the questions in the instruments used. This model challenges the traditional view of solving problems by focusing on future opportunities rather than focusing on problems. AI seeks to discover "what gives 'life' to a living system when it is most alive, most effective" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2007, p. 3). The assumptions and principles of AI provide a basis for research.

Specific components of AI form the basis for the process and data collection for this research: (a) discovery, (b) questions, and (c) the positive principle. The first step in AI is the discovery phase (Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). An important aspect of discovery is “sharing best practices to enhance effectiveness and efficiency” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 30). Furthermore, discovery is the search for the best of what is and has been (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). This research focuses on the best practices of high school religion teachers and asks teachers to participate in this discovery stage. Within the AI process, questions are asked of individuals in organizations to: (a) identify and study moments of excellence, (b) solicit information on successful processes, and (c) provide feedback and insights on what works (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006). This research asks teachers to do all three: (a) choose a best lesson, (b) explain what is included in the lesson, and (c) give ideas for future implementation of the instructional practices. The positivity principle says, “positive questions lead to positive change” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p. 63). By asking positive questions, research can bring out the best in people while seeking out positive futures (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). The instrument focused on asking positive questions of participants about a lesson taught.

### **Frameworks for Effective Teaching**

Comprehensive frameworks of effective teaching help define and recognize effective teaching. Three frameworks provided theoretical underpinnings for this research, specifically Marzano (2007), Danielson (2007), and Stronge (2007). These frameworks provide research showing effective teaching can be studied, taught, and learned. Each framework includes various categories to describe effective teaching such as effective management, classroom environment, implementing instruction, and professional responsibilities.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a mixed-methods, non-causal, cross-sectional design to examine best instructional practices of high school religion teachers.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected purposively based on employment as high school religion teachers during the 2012-2013 school year. Teachers worked in one of the 15 high schools located in the Archdiocese of Seattle, Diocese

of Spokane, or the Diocese of Yakima. Of the 82 teachers invited, 32 (39%) responded and provided consent for participation. Participants were then emailed the link to the online survey and were given 2 weeks to complete it. One week after the survey was sent, a reminder was sent to those who had consented to participate. On the deadline for the survey an extension date was emailed to the participants providing more time to complete the survey. Of the 32 participants who consented, 23 completed the survey. Of all religion teachers in Washington State, 28% participated.

The low response and mortality rates negatively impacted the sample size. McMillan (2008) describes one disadvantage of online surveys is the low response rate, even though there are also many advantages such as a fast response time and respondents enter answers directly for each question.

**Participant demographics.** The participants had a variety of backgrounds and experience. The majority of participants worked in schools in the Archdiocese of Seattle (69.6%), followed by the Diocese of Spokane (17.4%), and then the Diocese of Yakima (8.7%). Participants had a wide range of experience teaching as measured by the length of time teaching. The newest teacher was in year 1 and the most experienced teacher was in year 45. Table 1 outlines the years of teaching experience of participants.

Table 1  
*Participants' Years of Teaching Experience*

Classification	Frequency	%
Years of teaching		
5 or less years	4	17.4
6 – 20 years	7	30.4
21 – 39 years	7	30.4
40 or more years	4	17.4
No response	1	4.3
Years of teaching high school religion		
5 or less years	5	21.7
6 – 20 years	9	39.1
21 – 39 years	5	21.7
40 or more years	3	13.0
No Response	1	4.3

*Note.*  $n = 23$ . One participant did not complete demographic questions.

Table 1 shows the relatively equal distribution of participants who are newer to the profession and those who are veteran teachers. The mean for years of teaching was 17.5 and median was 19.5. For years of teaching high school religion, mean was 21.0 and median was 13.0. The high standard deviations for both years of teaching ( $SD = 13.9$ ) and years of teaching high school religion ( $SD = 14.0$ ) show the diversity in the years of experience of the participants.

An additional measure of experience is the educational background of participants. Table 2 provides data on the degrees, state certification, and catechetical certification status of participants.

Table 2  
*Educational and Training Background of Participants*

Classification	Frequency	%
Degree held		
Bachelors	22	95.7
Master's	17	73.9
Doctorate	1	4.3
No response	1	4.3
State teaching certificate		
Yes	16	69.6
No	6	26.1
No response	1	4.3
Diocesan catechetical certification		
Yes	8	34.8
In progress	9	39.1
No	5	21.7
No response	1	4.3

*Note.*  $n = 23$ . One participant did not complete demographic questions. Participants could select multiple answers for questions.

Table 2 shows the variety of education and training the participants in the sample have received. There were 31 different majors held by participants. The most common majors included: (a) religious studies or theology ( $n = 6$ ), (b) education ( $n = 5$ ), and (c) psychology and math (both  $n = 3$ ). Furthermore, 17 participants have a Master's degree and one participant has a doctoral degree (Juris Doctor). The most common Master's degree majors were education ( $n = 10$ ) and theology or religious studies ( $n = 6$ ).

## Materials

**Survey of Instructional Practices (SIP).** An online survey, the Survey of Instructional Practices (SIP), was created, piloted, and implemented. The purpose of the SIP was to gather self-report data on the instructional practices used by high school religion teachers in a specific lesson of their choosing they deem effective.

The SIP was organized into four parts. Part 1 asked participants to choose a best lesson taught in a high school religion class. Participants explained the purpose and overview of the lesson. Part 1 also asks participants to choose from a checklist of instructional practices which specific practices were used in the lesson. This checklist was created by the researcher after a literature review of research on instructional practices. Example items in the checklist include discussion, film or video clip, questioning by teacher, debate, and journal writing. Part 2 asked teachers to respond to questions about how other teachers could best implement these instructional practices in religion courses. Part 3 asked two questions about opportunities participants have to share best practices and take on leadership roles at school. Part 4 collected demographic information of the participants.

**Validity and reliability.** Various steps were taken to establish validity and reliability. The main threat to validity was mortality, or the number of participants who dropped out or chose not to participate (Creswell, 2009). To counter this threat, a large sample was recruited to account for participants who do not complete the survey. Follow-up requests were sent to those who do not respond within 2 weeks. Strategies used to ensure qualitative validity included multiple independent coders who sought intercoder agreement and consensus (Creswell, 2009). Participants were asked for feedback on the findings to evaluate the perceived validity of the results by participants (Patton, 2002). Reliability of survey items was achieved through a test-retest check. This test checked for the “degree to which measurement error is absent from the scores yielded” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 200). To achieve this, five individuals outside the participant pool took the online survey at two separate times, approximately three weeks apart.

**Pilot and Reliability Test.** The first pilot focused on the content and usability of the SIP. Two former high school religion teachers in Washington State each reported all questions on the survey were understandable, the survey took 20 minutes to complete, and the longest part was choosing a lesson to use.

A second pilot focused on testing the reliability of the instrument through a test-retest reliability check. For this check, five religion and history teachers not part of the participant pool took the survey two separate times, approximately three weeks apart. There was a strong, positive correlation (Creswell, 2009) between the test and the retest for each respondent, with  $r$  values ranging from .79 to .93. When focusing on the components of the survey related only to the explanation of the best lesson and opportunities for leadership, with demographic responses excluded, the survey had a strong, positive correlation of  $r = .81$ . When the entire survey was correlated, there continued to be a strong, positive correlation of  $r = .86$ . Through this test-retest, it was shown the instrument was statistically reliable.

**Member Check Survey.** After the findings were compiled through quantitative and qualitative analyses, participants were emailed the summary. The purpose of this follow-up was to assess face validity of the findings (Patton, 2002) by asking participants how much the findings related to their experiences of teaching high school religion. This survey listed the six best instructional practices and the top ways to best implement best practices. Participants were then asked to what extent these findings connect with their understanding and experience teaching high school religion. All respondents ( $n = 12$ ) reported the findings connected with their understanding and experiences either “quite a bit” ( $n = 6$ ) or “a high amount” ( $n = 6$ ). Overall, the findings positively related to the understanding and experiences of the participants showing the face validity of findings to be high (Patton, 2002).

## **Procedure**

To begin the research study, the Survey of Instructional Practices (SIP) was created by the researcher after a literature review of related topic and was vetted by Catholic school teachers. The survey was piloted and reliability calculated. The consent form and invitation to participate was emailed to all high school religion teachers in Washington. Individuals who agreed to participate were then emailed the survey. Follow-up and reminder emails were sent to all those invited to participate.

After the data were collected, the demographic data were analyzed and presented in tallies and percentages, and where applicable means and standard deviations. The checklist of instructional practices was analyzed and presented in tallies and percentages. The data on opportunities to share instructional practices were analyzed and presented in tallies and percentages.

Responses from the open-ended questions on the survey were analyzed through the interpretive process of coding. To begin the process, the researcher read the data using the inductive process of coding to find repeating patterns and themes (Patton, 2002). This process was repeated multiple times to analyze for themes emerging through the data. The data were also analyzed in this process looking for recurring words to help the creation of categories for coding (Patton, 2002). After this process a separate trained coder, independently analyzed and coded the data using the coding categories rubric. The researchers compared and discussed similarities and differences in the coding, themes, and patterns. Intercoder agreement was established and consensus was achieved (Creswell, 2009).

### **Strengths**

Strengths are found in both the study and the findings. First, the research questions address a population that has not frequently been researched. Second, the instrument was piloted before being administered and the instrument was found to be statistically reliable through a test-retest check. Third, during the data collection process, two independent coders reached intercoder agreement on all qualitative data analysis. Fourth, the findings of best instructional practices for high school religion teachers in Washington State align with current literature on best practices for instruction. Fifth, the findings are highly related to the understanding and experience of participants.

## **Findings**

### **Best Instructional Practices**

To answer the first research question, the SIP asked participants to provide an overview to one best lesson encouraged student learning. Participants then selected the instructional practices used in this lesson from a list of 30 common instructional practices. To determine the best instructional practices of high school religion teachers in Washington State, the most frequently used instructional practices in best lessons were tabulated. Table 3 shows the six most common instructional practices used by participants in the lesson described. The frequency refers to how many teachers reported using that instructional practice at some point in the lesson. The percentage shows how many teachers out of the entire sample used that instructional practice in the lesson.

Table 3  
*Instructional Practices Used in Lessons*

Instructional practice	Frequency	%
Discussion	21	91.3
Application to real-world situations	19	82.6
Application to student's own life	18	78.3
Questioning by teacher	16	69.6
Cooperative or collaborative learning	15	65.2
Identify similarities and differences	14	60.9

*Note.*  $n = 23$ . Participants could select as many instructional practices as were used in the lesson.

The top six were reported because of the frequency used by the teachers in the sample. In the list, the next eight most frequently used practices were used in 52% or less of the lessons.

Using a number of instructional practices can help to create further engagement for students (Danielson, 2007). Table 4 shows the correlations between the number of instructional practices used in the lesson reported and key demographic information of participants.

Table 4  
*Correlations Between Number of Instructional Practices and Selected Demographics*

Number of instructional practices correlated with	<i>r</i> value	<i>p</i> value
Years of teaching	.252	.259
Years of teaching religion	.319	.148
Having a master's degree	.500	.018*
Having a state certification	-.309	.162

*Note.*  $n = 23$ . One participant did not complete demographic questions.

\* $p < .05$ .

A moderate correlation was found between the number of instructional practices used and having earned a master's degree ( $r = .500$ ). This correlation was the only correlation that was statistically significant. Although statistically insignificant, it is interesting to note the correlation between having a

state certification and the number of instructional practices used was negative. These numbers may highlight earning a masters' degree may increase numbers of instructional practices used more than earning state certification. Looking only at these two demographics, participants with neither a masters' degree nor state certification and participants with state certification but no masters' degree used the least number of instructional practices on average.

### **Implementation of Best Instructional Practices**

For the second research question participants responded to four specific questions on the SIP. Participants chose two instructional practices used in the lesson described. For each instructional practice chosen, participants explained the advice they would provide to a new teacher working to implement this strategy. The most prevalent theme among responses, meaning the most prevalent advice to best implement the best instructional practices in religion classes, was clear guidelines and directions. The second and third most prevalent themes were focused on students, namely students are engaged, and instructional practices are student-centered. The fourth most common advice was to have students working together.

### **Opportunities to Share Best Practices**

To answer the third research question participants answered two questions, one on opportunities to share best practices and one on leadership opportunities. Participants reported having opportunities to share best practices with colleagues, with the two most common means were informally. The most frequently cited opportunity is sharing best practices because they choose to meet with colleagues to share ideas (82.6%). The second most common means for sharing best practices is in informal settings such as the lunchroom or chaperoning (60.9%). Both require the teacher to take initiative to share best practices.

Table 5 explains the opportunities participants have to share best practices with colleagues, both formally and informally.

Table 5  
*Opportunities to Share Best Practices*

Classification	Frequency	%
Yes, informally because I choose to meet with colleagues to share ideas	19	82.6
Yes, informally such as in the lunch room or chaperoning	14	60.9
Yes, formally within my department	11	47.8
Yes, formally within our school	9	39.1
No	0	0.0
No response	1	4.3

*Note.*  $n = 23$ . One participant chose not to respond. Participants could select as many as apply.

Participants could add additional comments in response to the question on opportunities to share best practices. Again, two independent coders coded for recurring words and themes. Participants who chose to add additional comments ( $n = 11$ ) highlighted the collaboration that occurs among colleagues. The recurring words in responses explain this experience and include collaborate, meetings, and share. Furthermore, the responses were analyzed for themes. The most common themes of the descriptions for the opportunities to share best practices were meeting often with colleagues and collaborating to share ideas. A third theme was that participants reported the need for more time to share best practices.

## Discussion

### Best Instructional Practices

**Discussion and questioning.** In the literature, discussion and questioning by the teacher are often associated. In the lessons described by participants, many times discussion and questioning were tied together as well. For example, some discussions participants described included a discussion on what values we hold or a discussion on the common themes of biblical covenants. Questioning was included as part of the discussion at times. For example, one lesson included the teacher asking questions of the class while reading a primary source text to prompt student thinking and discussion on the topic.

Participants used discussion and questioning to prompt student responses and student engagement, both of which are supported in the literature on effective teaching.

Discussion in the classroom allows students to explore many perspectives while also encouraging students to find their own voice (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999). Additionally, discussion has been shown to lead “to gains in general subject mastery, reading comprehension, conceptual understanding, problem-solving ability, moral development, attitude change and development and communication skills” (Henning, 2008, p. 2). These higher-order thinking skills are beneficial for students across disciplines. Everist (2002) highlighted discussion as one of the eight facets of learning in religious education that heightens students’ engagement. Questioning by the teacher can take on many forms and provide different opportunities for students to respond. Each of the frameworks on effective teaching used in the theoretical frameworks for the study highlight questioning. Danielson (2007) explains questioning probes student thinking. Asking quality questions can make instruction engaging and challenge the students (Stronge, 2007). Teachers use of questions can help to raise the level of thinking students do on particular topics. Marzano et al. (2001) explain teachers can help student learning by asking higher-level questions.

**Application.** Both application to real-world situations and application to students’ own lives were among the best instructional practices extracted from the data. In lessons described, participants used examples relating topics to real-world situations such as a lesson on euthanasia and recent laws or looking into what budgets for families earning minimum wage look like. One activity described by a participant included students creating a covenant, modeled on a biblical covenant, to address a challenge in our world today. Many lessons described related topics to the student’s own lives as well. One lesson prompted students to think about a favorite children’s book from when they were little and recall the messages taught. This reflection led into a discussion of how parables teach lessons. Another example asked students to think journeys they have been on and then related those journeys to the Exodus story. Participants used many examples of bringing together the topics covered with applications to real-world situations and student’s own lives, both of which are supported by the literature.

Tileston (2004) explains through real-world applications students are able to make personal meanings in learning. Furthermore, Henning (2008) describes application discussions engage students in creating judgments and

gaining insight into real-world settings. Related to application to real-world situations, connecting learning to student's lives was also a best practice. This instructional practice weaves together instruction with students' feelings and experiences. In the context of religious education, Groome (1980) describes shared praxis, which engages learners in reflection in light of lived faith experiences. For religion teachers in Catholic high schools, application to real-world situations and students' lives are best practices that can be used in a variety of ways while teaching.

**Cooperative learning.** Cooperative and collaborative learning was used in many ways by participants. Several lessons included students completing activities in stations around the room, during which they worked in teams to accomplish the tasks for each station. Another lesson had students work together to create a skit of a parable to then share with the class. Cooperative and collaborative learning was used often in the lessons described in a variety of ways. Both cooperative and collaborative learning have long been highlighted in research on best practices. Marzano et al. (2001) explain cooperative learning has been statistically shown to improve student learning. The benefits of cooperative learning are vast, such as providing students opportunities to "speak, take initiative, make choices, and generally develop good lifelong learning habits" (Harmin, 1994). Estes, Mintz, and Gunter (2011) describe the wide range of benefits of collaborative learning, such as reaching content goals, developing higher-level thinking, and enhancing the social skills of students.

### **Implementation of Best Instructional Practices**

**Clear guidelines and directions.** Students benefit from clear guidelines and directions as teachers implement best instructional strategies. Many participants commented on this topic while answering questions on various instructional strategies. For example, when giving advice on debate one participant stated, "explain your expectations," and when giving advice on skits another participant noted to always have "specific directions and expectations." One participant commented, "it always pays huge dividends to be certain that your parameters and requirements are precise, concise, and in writing." Stronge (2007) points out to be effective teachers must ensure students know what is expected of them. Danielson (2007) explains clear, logical, and fair communication with students is a necessity for student success. Having clear guidelines and directions require teachers to be prepared and organized in implementing instructional practices so students are engaged.

**Students engaged.** Creating an environment where students are engaged is central to effective teaching. One participant explained by having students make connections between topics students are “engaged in the learning process.” Another participant stated, “the more teachers can emphasize relevance and help students integrate content into their own lives, the more likely students are to remember the information.” Effective teachers structure learning so it is engaging to students (Goe et al., 2008). Stronge (2007) explains instruction is all about a teacher’s ability to engage students. There are many ways students can be engaged in learning, such as behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively (Marzano, 2007). Teachers can foster this engagement in many ways. Danielson (2007) explains one way to create engagement is to use many different approaches to teaching.

**Student-centered.** A third way teachers can implement best practices is to create student-centered learning opportunities. Teacher-centered classes focus on what the teacher is doing, whereas the focus in a student-centered classroom is what the students are doing and learning. For example, one participant explained questions are “often more meaningful when they are more student-centered.” Although teacher-centered instruction has its place, one participant explained during a lecture it can be valuable to incorporate student-centered activities, such as “have students answer a question or practice explaining a new concept to the person sitting next to them.” Danielson (2007) created the framework for effective teaching grounded in the principle of student-centered instruction.

**Students working together.** From the data on implementation of best practices, a final theme was students working together. This principle is intertwined with the instructional practice of cooperative learning. Advice participants shared was varied about how to best implement students working together. One participant explained it could be helpful to assign groups to help students to stay on task. Another described how materials can be organized to help groups to work together. Research underscores the importance of opportunities for students to work together. Providing students opportunities to work together helps students to expand their interpersonal intelligence (Armstrong, 2009). Lotan (2003) explains not all tasks work well for groups but teachers must create assignments and tasks that are group worthy, such as tasks requiring complex problem solving and focus on instructionally important content. By implementing research on cooperative and collaborative learning teachers can provide great opportunities for students to complete meaningful work together.

### **Opportunities for Sharing Best Practices**

Overall, the data showed participants informally take opportunities to share best practices with colleagues. For example, one participant explained department members chose to meet with teachers of the same course on a weekly basis. These meetings were “a great opportunity to brainstorm best practices.” Another explained the teachers in neighboring classrooms “are always asking for help from one another.” This finding is in line with research on effective teaching and teacher leadership. Goe et al. (2008) highlight effective teachers collaborate with other teachers. The days of teacher isolation are changing and more collaboration is taking place. Through collaboration, all teachers can share ideas, practices, and questions with the ultimate goal of improving student learning and engagement. One challenge to sharing best practices with colleagues is time. Data highlighted participants could use more time to collaborate. In regard to collaboration with colleagues, participants commented, “we could use much more collaboration,” “we need to do it more,” and “I would like to see more of this happening.” Another participant stated, “unfortunately, we do not spend a great deal of time on curriculum during our department meetings.” Collaboration does not happen on its own; teachers choose to create the time to informally share best practices with colleagues and may benefit from more formal opportunities to do so.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of the study include: (a) using a self-report instrument may result in social desirability in responses; (b) administering the survey electronically; (c) using newly developed survey which has implications for validity and reliability; and (d) sample size. To deal with these limitations several steps have been taken. Names of individual teachers were not associated with the surveys. All surveys were sent to teachers’ school email addresses where teachers have Internet access, therefore not excluding anyone from being able to participate. The instrumentation was developed, vetted, and piloted. The validity and reliability of the instrument was examined prior to conducting the research.

## **Conclusions**

### **Collaboration**

Collaboration is central for students and teachers. This theme spans across the data and findings from all three research questions, such as coop-

erative or collaborative learning as a best instructional practice and teachers collaborating to share best practices. Best instructional practices are not about isolation, of students or teachers. Students who are given opportunities to work cooperatively with other students can increase learning (Marzano et al., 2001). Cooperative learning can help students to be engaged in the learning process. Teachers also can benefit from collaborating with one another to share best practices. Through collaboration teachers can help one another to try new instructional practices and build capacity among colleagues (Harris & Muijs, 2011). Overall, by incorporating more opportunities for collaboration, learning for students and teachers can be increased.

### **Engagement**

Creating opportunities for students and teachers to be engaged in the learning process is beneficial. One theme that emerged from the advice on how to best implement best practices was to create opportunities for students to be engaged. As Marzano (2007) explains, engagement is key for student learning. The six best instructional practices have the underlying theme of student engagement. For example, discussions encourage attentive listening and exploring many views (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999), engaging students in these processes. Application to real-world situations and student's own lives allows students to be engaged through personal connections to the material being studied (Tileston, 2004). Teachers also are engaged in learning. Teachers choose to engage with colleagues in conversations on best instructional practices. Teachers recognize the power of sharing (Pellicer & Anderson, 1995) and engage in activities that allow for sharing of best practices.

### **Recommendations for Future Practice**

High school religion teachers can use the findings to incorporate the best instructional practices in teaching to promote student engagement. When planning for instruction, teachers may want to seek out specific ways to include discussion and questioning in lessons. Questions can help to create discussions that probe students thinking and have valuable interactions with information (Danielson, 2007). High school religion teachers may seek to integrate application to real-world situations and student's own lives more often in lessons. These applications provide opportunities for students to be engaged as they make personal connections to classroom learning (Armstrong, 2009). Cooperative learning provides many opportunities for students to work together. The social skills developed in cooperative learn-

ing can benefit students both in classrooms and also “within a family, with friends and neighbors, on the job, and in life generally” (Jacobs, Power, & Loh, 2002, p. 5). The best practices reported in this study can be integrated into the teaching of high school religion teachers.

Religion departments, schools, and dioceses can incorporate the findings into formal professional development opportunities for high school religion teachers to share best practices. The findings can serve as a starting point for conversations to share best practices. Professional development opportunities could take on many different forms. One example is teachers could share best practices about how to use many instructional approaches to support student engagement (Danielson, 2007). Using the themes for how to best implement best practices, religion teachers could engage in professional development that models best instructional practices. As explained through appreciative inquiry, taking opportunities to share best practices can “enhance effectiveness and efficiency” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 30). Additionally, high school principals and administrators could create staff time for collaboration. The time constraints for collaboration can be challenging, however the leadership in Catholic high schools could work to create more opportunities for teacher collaboration. Overall, incorporating the findings on best instructional practices for high school religion teachers in Washington State could enhance professional development opportunities.

### **Recommendation for Future Research**

Future research could expand to include high school religion teachers from a variety of schools around the country. In expanding the sample, future research could highlight geographically diverse schools of similar background, such as Jesuit schools or single gender schools. The sample could also be expanded to non-Catholic religious schools that teach religion. By increasing the diversity of the locations of schools, future research may build upon the findings in this study and add to the research base for the best instructional practices of high school religion teachers.

Catholic high schools across the country are implementing a common curriculum framework (USCCB, 2008). This framework outlines the courses that are taught as part of the religion curriculum for high schools. In light of this framework, future research can focus on best instructional practices in these courses. As schools adopt the framework, future research can highlight best instructional practices in addition to sharing the best lessons with other religion teachers. Research on the best lessons and instruction for high

school religion now can be aligned to the framework. The implementation of this curriculum across the country allows for greater opportunities for research to help teachers to share best practices.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Religion teachers in Catholic high schools are integral to the Catholic identity of schools and work to bring together religious instruction and faith for their students. This study sheds light onto the best instructional practices of high school religion teachers and offers data on the importance of creating instruction that is collaborative and engaging. The findings highlight the significance of collaboration, both among students and teachers. As teachers continue to adopt courses to the USCCB (2008) framework, there is even greater opportunity to collaborate beyond schools to dioceses, archdioceses, states, and the country.

This study was personally meaningful and helped me to remember every single lesson I teach has the potential to be meaningful, engaging, and student-centered. Given the fast pace of life in schools, it is easy to forget this. At times, it may seem easier to opt for using the exact lesson from last year or showing a video because it is easier than planning an engaging lesson. Completing this research and seeing the many examples of best lessons described by participants inspires me to continue to work to make my own lessons the best for students.

The vocation of high school religion teacher is gratifying, challenging, and fun. As Catholic schools continue to educate thousands across the country, high school religion teachers have an opportunity to continue to learn and grow as teachers to help all students grow in faith, reason, understanding, and compassion. The teachers who choose this vocation deserve to have helpful resources to incorporate into lessons and assignments. This study seeks to offer some helpful data for teachers to use. More research and collaboration will continue to help enhance the instructional capacity of high school religion teachers. Students in Catholic high schools will benefit greatly—students who will go on to be active participants and leaders in our Church and communities.

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