Looking at Catholic Schools' Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic Through the Lens of Catholic Social Teaching Principles

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Cover Page Footnote

Looking at Catholic Schools' Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic Through the Lens of Catholic Social Teaching Principles

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The current COVID-19 crisis has significantly impacted all teachers throughout the country, in particular, those teaching in urban schools. The urgent nature of this crisis has brought new challenges to urban Catholic school educators specifically, and their ability to enact and model Catholic Social Teachings which include; respect for the life and dignity of the human person, the call to care for family and community, solidarity in uniting the human community, the dignity of work and the rights of workers, providing persons with rights that ensure decent lives such as an education, preferential option for the poor, and care for all creation. Using critical theory and narrative analysis, this paper examines how 31 urban Catholic school teachers perceive and address the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning in their classrooms. Analysis of these teacher's narratives illustrate how Catholic Social Teachings are foundational to their response to the current situation. The conceptual framework and methodology of the research, and findings are presented. A key aim of this paper is to provide some concrete examples of the current urban Catholic school landscape and practice recommendations for all teachers, particularly those working alongside marginalized communities.

Keywords

COVID-19, urban Catholic schools, inequity, Catholic Social Teaching Principles

I n *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965), Paul VI notes that the vocation of teaching demands "special qualities of mind and heart, very careful preparation, and continued readiness to renew and to adapt" (p. 113). The call for urban Catholic educators to renew and adapt has undoubtedly been more challenging in the current COVID-19 crisis and is only expected to become more challenging, given the subsequent economic, academic, educational, and emotional fallout will only exacerbate this struggle (Wodon, 2020). Urban education was already fragile, as the "urban poor and the schools they attend face a tangled

net of material, organizational, and cultural obstacles that hinder learning, the development of abilities, and thus the social and personal development of children and youth" (Silva-Layam, D'Angelo, García, Zúñiga, & Fernández, 2020, p. 17). Transitioning spontaneously from face-to-face to online instruction in urban preK-12 schools brought this extraordinary viral disruption into focus, further clarifying existing educational inequities of urban education. As Leah Rosen notes: "COVID-19 is like an x-ray of society" (2020, p. 1), illuminating society's rampant economic, social, religious, and physiological inequities and the prognosis could be grim!

Urgency dictates therefore, that Catholic educators continue to enact and model Catholic Social Teachings, a foundation of Catholic education. Respect for the life and dignity of the human person, the call to care for family and community, principle of solidarity in uniting the human community, the dignity of work and the rights of workers, providing persons with rights that ensure decent lives such as an education, preference for the poor, and care for all creation are principles that inform teaching and learning in Catholic schools. McVey and Poyo (2019) offer a framework, PROFEss, that structures authentic Catholic education in service of Catholic Social Teachings. The framework illustrates how professionalism, pedagogy, relationship, formation, and evangelization intersect in the context of education, and are essential to developing persons who work for social justice. Living this mission is difficult in the traditional, education-as-usual, life of Catholic schooling, but amidst a global pandemic that has profoundly altered our ways of teaching, learning, relating, thinking, forming, worshipping, evangelizing, living, and being in the world, enacting this mission seems elusive and unattainable. Yet it is in this time of crisis effectively enacting this mission is tantamount to maintaining any type of educational equity for the least among us. Thus, our research asks:

1. How do teachers in the Urban Catholic Teacher Corps (UCTC) perceive and address the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning in their classrooms?
2. To what degree if any does COVID-19 influence educators' capacity to enact Catholic Social Teachings in their instruction?

The following research employs critical theory and narrative analysis to explore how 31 teachers in UCTC perceive and address the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning in their classrooms. First. we define educational equity and access and illustrate how Catholic Social Teachings are

foundational to educational equity. Then we present the conceptual framework and methodology of our research, our findings and analyses, and implications for current and future practice.

Educational Equity and Access and Catholic Social Teachings

Educational Equity and Access

What is educational equity and access and what does it (should it) look like in Catholic schools? All children have the inalienable right to *educational equity* which guarantees achievement, fairness, and rich opportunities for learning. All children have the inalienable right to *educational access* which guarantees learning in safe schools with qualified teachers and sufficient resources. More than fifty years after the Kerner Commission Report (1968) which resulted in legislation to improve educational equity for public school children, however, "educational equity [remains] a dream deferred" (Darling-Hammond, 2018, p. 1) for our most vulnerable children.

Historically, Catholic education has worked to achieve educational equity and "to integrate the curriculum, to unify faith and culture, and to bring together the different pieces of the school programme into a higher synthesis that influences the social and spiritual formation of pupils" (Lane, 1991, p. 12). For decades Catholic schools have been lauded for the Catholic School Advantage as they have demonstrated educational equity (high levels of achievement, fairness, and rich learning opportunities) especially for poor, low-income, and minority students (Rodriguez & Briscoe, 2019). Yet, larger market-driven forces and neoliberalism which privilege more pragmatic educational goals--getting into college to get a good job--are in some cases replacing more important Catholic social values (Gleeson & Goldburg, 2019; Rodriguez & Briscoe, 2019). These values that emphasize Catholic Social Teachings in service of equity, social justice, and human rights.

As educational discourse in contemporary society becomes increasingly dominated

> by the language of 'training,' a Catholic educational discourse which emphasizes 'formation of the person' is not only counter-cultural, but more humane. It insists that the ultimate goal of the educational process is the formation of good persons equipped with knowledge and skills to serve the common good motivated by faith and a Catholic social conscience. (Grace, 2013, p. 104)

Almost a decade ago, Grace indicated that grounding Catholic school curriculum in Catholic Social Teachings was the only way to "prevent a process of incorporation into a secularized and technicist educational culture" (p. 104) and mindless assimilation of market-driven forces and values. Catholic Social Teachings assert principles that structure practice and pedagogy, agents of transformation. It is all the more critical that Catholic educators prevail in transforming these teachings into action during the current and subsequent chaos of COVID-19.

Catholic Social Teachings

Life and Dignity of the Human Person
"Although Catholic Social Teachings encompass seven major themes, these inextricably linked themes are subsumed under the larger theme of respect for the life and dignity of the human person. School is of critical importance when considering life and dignity of every human as it is a context of synthesis of "themes of catholic, community, mission, education and church" (Hall, Sultmann, & Townend, 2019, p. 17). As urban, Catholic school educators practice in schools that serve economically disadvantaged students, they are charged to address social inequities by providing rich educational opportunities to all but especially to those who are impacted most by injustice.

Protection of Rights and Responsibilities in Respecting the Human Person
"Asset-, equity-, and justice-oriented pedagogy...refers to a critical, emancipatory pedagogical approach that aims to affirm and empower culturally and linguistically diverse students' daily knowledge, skills, and lived experiences conducive to academic success in schools" (Zhu, 2020, p. 3). Such pedagogy affirms the inalienable rights of educational equity and access which manifests respect for the life and dignity of the human person, contributes to the common good, creates and sustains the welfare of society writ large, and enacts the principle of subsidiarity. Catholic educators through professionalism and pedagogy are responsible for protecting these rights (McVey & Poyo, 2019).

Even more integral to access and equity is the underlying right to life, which asserts that each person has the fundamental "right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture" (United States Conference of Bishops, 2005). Such basic needs must be first satisfied if learning is to occur. Limited or poor

nutrition, no or limited access to healthcare, fear of losing shelter, the inability to work safely and productively for a living wage, or threatened capacity to preserve and support family structures alone obstruct basic right to life but in combination almost deny a person's right to life. Being a Catholic educator is a choice of more than what type of school to teach in, it is a choice to actively work tirelessly on behalf of the full and equitable right to life of all individuals from conception to natural death.

Call to Family, Community, and Participation

Community assumes a variety of forms and structures. Family is the most nuclear form of community within society. Assuring the well-being of family is critical to the health and welfare of society. Furthermore, family nurtures the development of a child's identity, potential, self-esteem, and sense of meaning and purpose.

The urban Catholic School and the Church are intentional Christian communities called to enhance the welfare and well-being of children and their families as evidenced in their mission and purpose (Denig & Dosen, 2013). "As a result, there is a sense of evangelization, community, holistic personal and religious development and a commitment to social justice and service" (Miserandino, 2019, p. 106). In support of the family's role as primary educator (Canon Law 226§2 and 793§1), urban Catholic educators strive to assure educational equity and access for their students and model care for all of God's creations, demonstrating what it means to be part of the caring human community. Finally, when equity-focused partnerships are formed among family, school, church, and Catholic institutions of higher education, strong communities of collaboration work "to build resilience, close achievement gaps, create opportunities, resources, and networks for students in urban and high poverty schools" (Bryan, Williams, & Griffin, 2020, p. 11). These communities are called to improve the life chances, health, and welfare of all persons. Catholic educators must actively engage in these equity-focused partnerships.

Solidarity

Solidarity charges Catholic educators to act for "the good of all and of each individual" (St. John Paul II, *On Social Concern*). Teaching and acting for social justice on behalf of students and families and demonstrating genuine compassion for not only those we know but also those we do not know. It is essential to keep all others in our hearts and minds, especially the poor and

disenfranchised. Catholic schools as institutions must work in solidarity with those on the margins by taking action to diminish inequalities (Weithman, 2019). Educating children to realize that society writ large is an interdependent community of persons and that we are called to advocate for the health and welfare of all assures the seeds of solidarity. Thus, Catholic educators have a moral commitment to the status of students by providing equitable access to all opportunities.

Dignity of Work and Rights of Workers

"We were created with a vocation to work… Work is a necessity, part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfillment" (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops). For Catholic educators teaching is a vocation, a calling to serve, not just a career or a means to an end; these educators work "out of regard for others… for the society he belongs to, the country of which he is a child, and the whole human family of which he is a member, since he is the heir to the work of generations and at the same time a sharer in building the future of those who will come after him in the succession of history" (St. John Paul II, *On Human Work*, no. 16). Catholic educators work to develop the talents, abilities, and gifts of their students, preparing them to "lead a worthy life on the material, social, cultural and spiritual levels (Blessed Paul VI, *A Call to Action,* no. 14) and to build the future.

Preferential Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

Catholic educators are servant leaders, charged to put faith into action especially during times of crisis and especially in service of those on the margins. Education as liberation can enable the marginalized to improve their social, economic, and political condition (Deguma et al., 2020). Catholic schools and educators are obligated to consider the economic conditions of their students as they plan and deliver instruction, essential to liberation. Further, a response to poverty must go beyond building the capacity of the poor to increase income to integrating strategies to promote asset development for the poor (Bailey, 2010). This idea of asset development, an outgrowth of the "capability approach" (Nussbuam, 2001; Sen, 2005), maintains that freedom to achieve optimal development and well-being is defined by what people are able to do and to be, and hence the nature of life they are effectively able to lead. To this end, if Catholic school educators are to be in relationship with those on the margins they must provide an equitable education

while also actively engaging in social change efforts that push society toward equity in opportunity no matter the position one is born into.

Care for God's creations

Pope Francis' *Laudato Si* is grounded in the theory of Integral Ecology and poses a comprehensive conceptual framework to guide how humankind must care for people and planet.

> Integral Ecology is a comprehensive framework for characterizing ecological dynamics and resolving environmental problems...draw[ing] upon and provid[ing] a theoretical scheme for showing the relations among a variety of different methods, including those at work in the natural and social sciences, as well as in the arts and humanities. Integral ecology unites, coordinates, and mutually enriches knowledge generated from different major disciplines and approaches. (Esbjörn-Hargens & Zimmerman, 2009, p. 2)

Catholic educators must model such caring through pedagogies that show interdisciplinary connections through thematic units, actionable service that support ecological and environmental issues and solutions, daily habits of being and stewardship in the world, and discussion and thinking that considers the critical relationships between humans and the environment and the implications of disrespect for and destruction of the planet on the poor and vulnerable.

Methodology

Conceptual Framework: Critical Theory and Catholic Social Teaching

Bradley-Levine and Carr (2015) argue effectively for using critical theory and Catholic Social Teaching (CST) in research about Catholic education. Critical theory and CST charge educators and researchers to work for social justice, "to act alongside of the oppressed in an effort to end repressive situations and structures" (p. 30), to preserve the rights of the persons through enacting the responsibilities of caring for humanity in service of the common good, and to work toward solidarity among all persons. As critical theory supports investigations into the factors that inform the distribution of power within a social system, particularly those economic, social, religious, discursive, and educational practices that support the imbalance of opportunity,

power, and equity of disadvantaged persons, these variables are particularly salient in examining how urban Catholic educators perceive and process teaching and learning during this pandemic and how these experiences influence teaching and learning in the "new normal" classroom contexts. We are all too cognizant of the "normal" fiscal, ethical, logistical, structural, and moral challenges that threaten the survival of Catholic education and Catholic educators. The "new normal" will only exacerbate this struggle; thus, Catholic educators must build and exert agency in order to make good sense of teaching and learning not only during but also after this disruption and crisis.

Participants

The participants of this study were teachers in UCTC. UCTC is part of the University Consortium for Catholic Education, a partnership of Catholic colleges and universities with the (arch)diocese, Catholic schools, donors, and Catholic educators and students with the shared mission to both educate and form Catholic school teachers and to meet current schools' needs for teachers (see Davies & Kennedy, 2009). UCTC is a two-year, Catholic teacher formation program in which licensed educators concurrently complete graduate-level coursework in curriculum and instruction and the praxis component at a partnering urban Catholic school. UCTC teachers have the same responsibilities as peer teachers in their schools in addition to programmatic responsibilities.

Thirty-two UCTC teachers participated in this research. Participants included 26 females and 5 males whose ages ranged from 21 to 26 years. Twenty-nine identified as Catholic and one as Christian (non-Catholic) and one respondent did not report their religious identity. Years of experience teaching ranged from 1 to 3 years. All educators, with the exception of one who taught theology, were licensed educators that obtained licensure prior to acceptance into UCTC. While participation in any UCTC research study is voluntary, it is important to note that UCTC members are accustomed to participating in programmatic research including longitudinal quantitative studies on teacher effectiveness, religiosity, and other UCTC-related lines of inquiry. Participants for this qualitative study were recruited via email.

Procedures

When participating, Catholic schools transitioned to online instruction in mid-March, it became apparent that the need to explore the factors impacting the educational context of the UCTC teachers and their students

was paramount. UCTC programmatic staff, faculty, researchers, and graduate research assistants developed an extensive list of writing prompts and a questionnaire. Areas explored in these instruments included instructional resources developed or needed; schools' responses and processes; and, challenges and opportunities that have arisen during this time. This questionnaire was divided into smaller, weekly, online, self-administered journaling to accommodate teachers' increased workload due to the initial transition to online instruction and to facilitate participants' ability to provide detailed descriptions of their experiences. Data were collected using Qualtrics with text entry set at essay level to enable responses of greater length. Ongoing data collection began the first week of April. Examples of the questions include: (a) Has your school transitioned to online instruction? If yes, explain how your school has transitioned to online instruction? (b) Are there any online resources that you are using during this remote learning period that you plan to use when you return to the classroom? (c) How have you been working with parents and families during this time? (d) What has been the most difficult challenge that you have faced during this time and how are you addressing it? Data collected are collated into a "transcript" for each individual participant. These documents were uploaded into NVivo (QSR, version 12) and analysis was conducted using this qualitative software.

Data Analysis
    We analyzed the data using qualitative narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is a methodology that acknowledges that the person who is experiencing the event owns the event and has the right to tell or share the experience (Shuman, 2007, p. 38). "Narrative is well-suited to addressing the complexities and subtleties of human experience in teaching and learning" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 2). In these weekly online journal entries, urban Catholic teachers who are experiencing challenges and successes in teaching and learning during this crisis share responses to prompts about their experiences during COVID-19. As they own their experiences, narrative analysis is the most effective method for analyzing this data. Narrative analysis is an undertaking of finding narrative meaning which ultimately helps us understand the human experience (Kim, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1988).
    Narrative data analysis, similar to other approaches, involves a level of interpretation by researchers that clearly raises some concern over objectivity in drawing conclusions. Therefore, the data presented in this study were analyzed by several researchers. Analysis was divided in three stages in order to

identify common elements of the narratives and construct a taxonomy based on the narrative patterns. These stages include: (a) pre-analysis-read each narrative as it was collected on a weekly basis to understand the core lived experiences of UCTC members as they were emerging; (b) vertical analysis-identified basic components of the narratives for each participant and coding scheme was designed; and, (c) horizontal analysis-grouped narratives according to their common codes, themes and patterns and grouped into categories. Following the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), a taxonomy that aligned with Catholic Social Teachings was produced to organize the data.

Findings and Discussion

Perceptions and Sense-Making

Narrative analysis of participants' responses not only instantiated but also exacerbated teachers' existing perceptions of myriad inequities students were experiencing and continue to experience during this pandemic. Although teachers were well aware of the impact of poverty on the lives of their students' families, the virus placed these inequities front and center. Wodon (2020) outlines a litany of serious impacts of COVID-19 on Catholic school students, which become especially damaging for students in urban schools. Limited or no access to technology, range in quality of online teaching, absence of school breakfasts and lunches, "poor mental health, higher risks of violence at home, and a resulting exposure to toxic stress, as well as the risk for some students to simply drop out of school all together if the crisis makes the cost of schooling unaffordable for parents" (p. 15). UCTC members' reflections bring texture to Wodon's assessment. As one participant recounted:

> My concerns are that this will mean major setback emotionally, intellectually, and physically for my students. It will mean they will have to work twice as hard to get back to where they were before school shut down. In addition, many of them are facing extreme poverty. I am afraid of the ways the economic depression will affect their food sources and money flow.

As one teacher so aptly stated: "The pandemic is hitting the Black community hard, and most of my students are Black!"

Perceptions became realities as teachers overwhelmingly observed. One member explained:

> ...inequities that already existed in education are being exacerbated by the pandemic currently going on. Students with less access to technology are at a great disadvantage because all of our teaching and learning is now online. Students who have to care for their younger siblings are disadvantaged because they are less focused on their school work. Students with parents who have lost jobs are disadvantaged due to the worry and the fear that this causes. Students who come from immigrant families are disadvantaged also due to the worry and fear that this causes especially during this time with unknown answers about status as well as lack of access to health care.

According to the National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools, "An excellent Catholic school develops and maintains a facilities, equipment, and technology management plan designed to continuously support the implementation of the educational mission of the school" (2012). This standard may well be attainable in suburban or financially well-endowed urban Catholic schools, but the schools and students our UCTC teachers serve "either have limited or no access to technology or Internet." One observed "My students and their families have expressed to me that they do not have a device at home or that there is only one device for the entire family and they are juggling working from home themselves, and multiple children at home who also need access to a device in order to learn." The digital status of most of these children mirror Kang's report that "seven in 10 teachers now assign homework that requires web access. Yet one-third of kindergartners through 12th graders in the United States, from mostly low income and rural households are unable to go online from home," (2016). COVID-19 has only amplified the digital divide.

Consistently, teachers expressed worry that they were "not teaching students in a way that helps them combat these struggles, but instead hurting them." Permeating responses were serious concerns about limited or no access to technology and "with learning moving online, these are necessities that many of my families cannot afford." Several teachers had students with no technology. Consensus that this disruption "could have a significant impact on their education moving forward" further marginalizing already marginal-

ized students struck fear "that this could make [students] feel inferior and that their education is not as important because they do not have the access that other students do." Inequity viciously assailed the dignity and worth of students and their families.

> When I initially heard about the [school district] closure until April 30th a few weeks ago I got very emotional. I acknowledged that this closure of schools was going to unjustly affect the scholars at my school for several reasons out of their control.

Pre-COVID-19, our UCTC teachers had lived the themes that pervade the literature on inequities in urban schools; yet, consistent, daily human contact and face-to-face instruction enabled strong teacher-student relationships, informal and formal assessment documenting students' learning and change and growth over time and informing instruction, and persistent monitoring of students' and families' economic, social, and emotional well-being. In a matter of hours, these connections were altered, impacting already existing cognitive loads.

> Low income students are put at the greatest disadvantage. Data support traumatic stress and its effects on the germane load in relationship to low income/ students of poverty. Also, some of the low-income jobs are still essential during this time, which only exacerbates the extraneous load. Therefore, many students do not have the parental support because some parents have to work during this time. This leaves an adolescent student to make their own decisions about attending Zoom class or not, whereby many students will not make the mature decision to attend class.

Research indicates that reading and learning from printed materials is superior to reading and learning from digital materials (Sage, Piazzini, Downey, & Masilela, 2020), suggesting that learners should have the option of choosing the materials from which they learn. In the "new normal" for urban children choice is not an option! Many of the students our teachers serve are non-native English speakers, read and comprehend below benchmarks, and have special needs., which demand individualized instruction and effective accommodations. Furthermore, students that have no or limited access to technology or the Internet are highly unlikely to have printers, which afford

the choice of learning from printed materials. All the digital resources and websites in the world are useless without the tools or abilities to access them effectively.

Teachers were consumed with other worries about their students and families. Cognizant of high levels of obesity and other comorbid factors in low-income families, they noted how "these health issues are tied to higher death rates from COVID-19." Another shared that many of her students "also live with older family members and have mentioned that they are sick with COVID-19. I know that the disease is impacting people of color at higher percentages which unfairly affects many of my students and families"; while others observed that in many cases students from large families lived in small spaces facilitating the spread of the virus.

Inequities traveled far beyond education and access. Parents and guardians of most of the students our teachers served were essential workers on "the frontlines of the virus" or were single parents who had jobs in health care and could not work from home, jeopardizing online access for younger children who needed an adult to help them with technology. Concurrently, for those families where guardians had already been laid off there were resulting concerns "about the students' health and access to resources such as medical care and food." One teacher noted that "one of her students was in the middle of moving during the second week of online school, and he didn't complete his homework because he was busy packing boxes."

Teachers' observations only begin to recount the effects of poverty on urban students and the resulting educational inequity. Poor nutrition, no or limited access to health care, crowded living conditions and housing, comorbid factors compounding death from and contraction of COVID-19, limited or no technology, unemployment or required employment of essential workers in the frontlines of the pandemic, lack of adult supervision, responsibility of care for siblings, and absent students are some of the systemic issues students and families are facing. These are challenges, that education alone cannot address; yet, grounded in mission and ministry, our teachers continued to provide instruction, support, respect, and care for students, families, and each other.

Enacting Catholic Social Teachings

Despite seemingly overwhelming factors, analysis of responses illustrated several themes of Catholic Social Teachings teachers enacted to address COVID-19 challenges. Consistently demonstrating respect for the dignity

and worth of the human person, sustaining the call to family, community, and participation, and emphasizing solidarity, UCTC teachers took to heart the right and responsibility to protect, respect, and serve their students, families, schools, and colleagues. Interwoven throughout teachers' responses was also respect for the dignity of work. Another theme also emerged from analysis, that we refer to as "uniquely Catholic." Although these CST themes emerged, responses suggest that all Catholic Social Teachings are inextricably linked and work in concert to illustrate that the dignity and worth of the human person is sacrosanct.

Rights and Responsibilities to Protect the Dignity and Worth of the Human Person

Urban Catholic school educators view the school as a context for not only providing rich learning opportunities but also life sustaining supports that prepare children to learn from the time they enter the school building. Teaching as vocation demands that educators assume responsibility to protect and respect the dignity and worth of their students and families. UCTC teachers grappled with the multiple concerns they had for their students during this crisis. On one hand, they felt responsible for ensuring that all of their students continued to learn; and, on the other, were profoundly cognizant that many students' most basic needs of food, shelter, safety and health were not being met. This dueling tension was omnipresent in the narratives of these teachers, regardless of grade level or school site. This tension is palpable in this particularly poignant response:

> The scholars at my school are more than 90% of color. The studies have overwhelmingly shown that they are at risk the most for contracting or being affected by COVID 19 because of: housing disparities, poverty risk, mass incarceration, lack of adequate health care, and barriers to employment due to the underlying systemic and structural racism… A lot of the scholars at my school are also children of essential employees or parents with full time jobs at home: therefore their access to rich education has been my biggest concern besides the above listed.

Deep concern for students' overall physical, emotional, social, and academic welfare certainly illustrates the respect this teacher has for the dignity and worth of her students, but more revealing is how she perceives the relationship between the difficulties each "family community" confronts as it

struggles to sustain the lives and dignity of their children. Furthermore, as "essential workers" and "full time" employees, these parents clearly see the value and dignity of work and understand their responsibilities to protect their children; yet, they are at physical risk due to systemic and structural inequalities. Overwhelmingly, COVID-19 has heightened existing inequities and disparities in society.

The realization "that students had[d]more pressing issues at home" and that these issues took priority over "their school work" only reinforced one teacher's understanding of her students' lived realities. For other teachers this realization was all too apparent.

> I have had many students miss online class because they are working at CVS or that their parents have to go to work or because they are taking care of siblings or because they are going to the grocery store for their families. I am concerned that school responsibilities are adding unnecessary stress to students and their families.

Students, themselves, assumed responsibilities as part of their personal call to family, which demanded that they work, care for siblings, and shop for groceries in service of caring for others and themselves. Such behaviors also illustrate how these children, themselves, believe in the value and dignity of human persons as they go above and beyond to assure the family's well-being.

As teachers were concerned about student learning and grades, they continually struggled with "balancing compassion with the requirements from my school to give them a grade for class work every day" which was especially challenging "given the mentally and emotionally challenging experience my students are certainly having at home." Yet, teachers demonstrated and communicated utmost respect for parents and shared their struggles about "finding the right balance between giving rigorous tasks to students and being fair." One teacher shared:

> I reached out to all of my parents to explain why I am continuing to hold high standards for the kids in terms of attendance and deadlines, and that their concerns or obstacles, when communicated, will always be met with compassion and accommodations. I can't do much when the kids don't communicate about what they need, but providing accommodations is the only equitable response.

   While the concern for students' well-being ultimately outweighed some of their educational responsibilities, many teachers were keenly aware that "the education gaps that already exist [might] become greater. I worry that I am not teaching my students in a way that helps them combat these struggles, but instead is hurting them." One teacher noted that she had "not heard from all of my students yet and am worried about what will happen as they continue in their education." The implications of this disruption for educational access and equity for students' long-term academic achievement and outcomes railed in teachers' thoughts. One teacher described her concerns about the

> significant impact on their education moving forward and how they are able to proceed given an achievement gap...I have seen that these students have started to give up on their assignments because they know right away that they won't be able to access them so they give minimal effort and I fear that this could make them feel inferior and that their education is not as important because they do not have the access that other students do.

   Understanding that family structures and socioeconomic status influenced students' comfort levels, several teachers did not "require students to turn on their cameras or microphones" and did not grade attendance. Some allowed "students to complete any missing work for full credit" and permitted "students to join other sections of the same course if it is during their study block." This was especially helpful given that siblings needed to be online and that most homes had only one computer. Several teachers provided a variety of accommodations that facilitated instructional access outside of school hours or class time further emphasizing respect for the dignity of students and families and their role as collaborative agents within the teacher-student-school-family community.

> I have frequently asked for parent feedback in order to determine what I can do that will actually address the needs they have at home. I relaxed due dates, [as] I cannot force a student to be logged on for a lesson, nor can I dictate when they should have the time to complete assignments when I am unaware of parents' work schedules, family schedules, and the time that other kids in the house need as well. I have also made myself readily available even outside of "school hours" because this is

not a realistic timeframe for many of these families. If their child needs an individual lesson at a different time, I work with the parent to co-ordinate schedules. If parents simply need to ask a question at 7:00 pm on a weeknight because that is the time they have to help their child with work, then I respond right away, instead of waiting until "school hours" the next day. The best I can do right now is to work with families as a team, and so I do all I can to assure them that I am willing to work together for their child.

Call to Family, Community and Participation

Sustaining "community" was most challenging. Teachers discussed techniques and strategies that they used to stay "in community" with their students, schools, and each other. Some shared examples of schoolwide efforts to create supportive communities. "The principal sends out a weekly morning message with a video of herself and our Facebook page is alive with the community as well. Parents and students have been sharing pictures/videos of how they are learning or keeping busy at home." One teacher lauded the efforts her school was making to support community cohesiveness. She noted that the school sponsored "campus ministry events to gather the kids socially and spiritually." Zoom meetings for only seniors, online spirit week, online afterschool programs, virtual graduation, and virtual field days worked to enhance being "in community." One school offered a virtual mass on St. Joseph's day, (less than a week after the school began distance learning), and some teachers offered virtual yoga classes for students. Another teacher created YouTube videos for her students, observing: My students and I have certainly managed to keep up our community. It has been fun having a YouTube channel and seeing the students make comments on my videos. Another school offered "a themed Friday every week for students to stay positive." Teachers took seriously, the call to family, community, and participation. One "incorporated more resources for the students and came up with more opportunities for students to communicate with [her] directly. [She] created a phone number to use for school only and students have been contacting [her] to chat or to ask questions. It has been great!" Sending daily emails to students and celebrating students' birthdays virtually managed to help teachers and students stay "in community."

Teachers also mentioned how leadership worked to sustain the school community, "My school leaders are simply fantastic at making sure we are all

staying connected. We still have weekly PLC meetings still, we have family and staff happy hour each week, and we all still text and talk to one another. We had a really successful trivia night a few weeks ago, it all had been going well." As members in faith we share responsibility for assuring that we stay in community especially during the most challenging circumstances. Strong community supports teachers, leaders, families, and students as collaborative agents of change and contributes to the growth, flourishing, and survival of all. "We have had many opportunities to connect as a school community. As a staff, we host fun events such as happy hours, trivia nights, and even a virtual 5k that included the entire school community! Those have been great ways in which we have stayed connected. Leadership facilitated general operation of the school by hosting Zoom department and faculty meetings and having teachers create "multiple social media posts with all of the faculty, so that they can all see us. We tried our best to connect with each other across the staff as well and share ideas."

What emerged as particularly salient was how school communities worked tirelessly to stay in community with families. One school conducted a fundraiser to support families impacted by COVID-19. At this school, one teacher observed: Our principal always reminds the kids in any messages he sends out of the faith and the mission of the school community. Other teachers noted that "As a school community we have tried to make ourselves present to families so that they know we are still with them even if only in spirit." One elementary school sent out a daily "YouTube video of a prayer to families around 9am. One of our administrative staff says the prayer and it takes about 2 mins to pause and reflect."

Games, YouTube videos, chats, office hours, and the benefits reaped by such participation, however, could not ameliorate the profound void these teachers experienced not being in their classrooms directly interacting with students. "Since being at home, I have noticed so many aspects of community that I've taken for granted. I miss having teacher roommates that I can share all of my stories with and ask them for advice." Teachers acknowledged that "the hardest part is to not be with my students in our classroom at school every day to see their growth." This void was particularly challenging for some. "It feels like the best part of teaching has been removed with all the grading and planning still intact. I miss the connections, small talk, and all of the little moments that we had together. My students would make me laugh and smile so much throughout the day. Although they are still able to do this, it just isn't the same." Several came to "appreciate the value that there is in be-

ing in a classroom with the students. Having those connections and working one on one with students, the conversations and moments are irreplaceable," realizing again how much they took being part of such a dynamic community for granted. One teacher succinctly summed up the experience: "Honestly it makes teaching pretty boring!"

The call to family, community, and participation is intentional as all work together to enhance the welfare and well-being of children and their families as evidenced in their mission and purpose (Denig & Dosen, 2013). Furthermore, schools are places that nurture human connection, practice caring and compassion, and clarify the mission of solidarity especially during times of immense suffering and chaos. As one teacher noted: "Human connection is the best part of teaching for me. It has been challenging as I've had to learn to be more intentional about my interactions and more purposeful in what I say and do!" This is not to say that teaching interactions should not be intentional or purposeful, but does call into play the importance of the spontaneity, surprise, and joy that emanates from classroom conversations, delighted expressions of accomplishment, and quizzical faces of wonder. Furthermore, daily, face-to-face instruction reinforces soft skills (communicating, reflecting, creating, discussing) holds promise of preparing students to "be life ready and breaking the cycle of poverty…afford[ing] all learners the opportunity to acquire the skills to thrive" (Scribner, Cabrera, & Buerk, 2019, p. 7). "Human connection with students and our school community make teaching and learning more engaging for teachers and students. Distance learning removes that element and I am seeing in myself, coworkers, and students that all parties are not engaging because we are not in person."

And yet, for those teachers who have been able to maintain a certain sense of "community," these experiences have contributed to their own and their students' resilience during this crisis.

> In regard to both my membership in UCTC and my Catholic school, I think that the best resource I have been given is the community. Both as part of UCTC and [my school] I have been able to maintain human connection and feel a little less isolated and alone, which has helped my mental health, and then made it easier for me to do my very difficult job.

Communication with this community has "been key in feeling like we are still in community. The more I talk to people, the more I feel as though we

are in this together and not alone." Although all teachers strongly lamented how remote teaching and learning eliminated genuine human connection, they acknowledged that call to family, community, and participation so integral to Catholic education, established a foundation that in many ways eased their transition to online instruction. "In a Catholic school, you are able to build a community with your students and family. There is a unique bond that is formed between staff and families that in my opinion makes it easier to communicate with and continue that community at home."

Sustaining community has clearly impacted pedagogy. All teachers have found it a "vital part of [their] pedagogy to create connection and community virtually." As one teacher shared:

> I do everything in my power so that my students never feel alone and know that I am here for them, and that as a class, we are all still in this together. I have heard positive reactions from parents about how accessible I have been and how it has helped them and their families in these times. This positive feedback has helped me to still feel as though I am doing my best for these students, even if it doesn't feel as "rewarding" on my end.

Teachers remarked that despite their aversion to online instruction, *"This pandemic has shown* [them] *the ways in which a community can grow together while being physically apart."* Yet, they appreciate that *"technology [has given] us the opportunity to engage in our community more fruitfully."* Although technology has been instrumental in outreach and engagement, Becking and Grady (2019) observed that in 2019 "the divide is between classrooms and schools where technology is well integrated into the curriculum, and those classrooms where it is not well integrated into the curriculum" (p. 3). While authors assert that ineffective use of technology has greater impact on the divide than access, our teachers' responses illustrate, that without access, effective use is a nonissue.

Solidarity

Solidarity charges Catholic educators to act for "the good of all and of each individual" (St. John Paul II, On Social Concern, 1988). Teachers noted that "As strange as these times are, they have brought a new depth of relationship between me and the families I serve; we truly are working as a team for their child's education." UCTC teachers reassured students and families

that "they were there for them" and that they were doing all they could to assure that working with them was a priority. Teachers often sent pictures that chronicled the year prior to lockdown, "to keep them inspired and driven to come back ready to work." Essentially, they were a team of teachers, leaders, families, and students solidified in their mission to offer access and opportunity, individual and familial support, "sending prayers and words of encouragement" and making themselves "present to families so that they know we are still with them even if only in spirit."

Outreach was manifested in numerous ways. Several schools even demonstrated solidarity with public school students, initiating "community outreach effort of having our teachers prepare spring and summer enrichment classes to offer to public schools." One school developed a response team to support families and students in crisis, working to address specific needs. Fundraising enabled one school to offer each family monetary support. One school's vice-principal helped families access information, resources, food and financial assistance. Teachers and leadership were consistently aware of factors that, often prevented students from connecting online or submitting assignments, and as a result checked in frequently with students and families to provide support.

Solidarity presented in other forms as well. Teachers within and across these schools, community organizations, other educators, and UCTC leadership shared online resources and websites to facilitate the transition to online instruction.

> I think that one of the most challenging, but also fortunate, parts of this was that so many resources were thrown my way all at once from a plethora of different organizations and people. Taking the time to sift through all of the ideas and online resources was a lot. I feel lucky that I really didn't have to reach out because I am still receiving emails and texts with resources that people recommend and have found helpful.

In another school teachers banded together and pooled lessons immediately in anticipation of lockdown. "Upper school scholars (4-6) took home school chrome books and are using google classroom like they have been doing all year." Boston Public Schools even donated 40 additional laptops to distribute to families in need. Teachers shared iPads with families and provided online files of work that parents could print out or recreate at home.

Despite valiant efforts to remain in solidarity, many families experienced the effects of the pandemic in ways that challenged teachers to serve students and families effectively. Chelsea, Massachusetts incurred the second highest number of COVID-19 cases and deaths in the Commonwealth (Kashingsky, 2020). UCTC teachers in Chelsea noted that the virus impacted parents' and students' responses to outreach efforts. Difficulty connecting with these families raised serious concerns for students' and families' well-being, potentially preventing needed support. One teacher noted that she "had difficulty connecting with families whose native language is Spanish. I try my best to translate anything that I send out but I am not able to call them and talk as we would be able to do in school with a translator." Weithman (2019) notes that we must extend love "beyond our immediate circle to encompass all the other members of a sprawling modern society" (p. 313) and that true solidarity is a "commitment to the good of all" (p. 316). These are virtues that challenge not only ethical scholars but also all of us. These educators strived to live the mission of solidarity as they served urban students in the most effective ways possible.

Uniquely Catholic

Although private, public, charter and parochial schools across the country have worked tirelessly to provide continuous instruction to students, responses supported a theme that we refer to as "uniquely Catholic" as teachers mention their faith and religious beliefs as critical in sustaining vocation, mission, and teaching.

Prayer, ministry, and "having faith and trust in God help us bring the good out of every evil." Several teachers at different schools discussed the importance of prayer not only for their students and families but also for themselves. "In a similar way as my students, I have had to surrender my trust in God and pray that I can accept his will in this crazy time. I pray for strength and comfort, and just have to believe that he will triumph in the end." One teacher observed that "A lot of them [students] have turned to prayer in this troubling time and it has helped them to learn about prayer and God's role in our lives. Together teachers and students demonstrated faith and an ongoing relationship with God through prayer, essentially "Living out faith in an authentic manner" (McVey & Poyo, 2019, p. 116) daily during a most difficult time. For one school has even included praying the rosary together even though physically separated. "Teaching my students about God and his love has been comforting to a lot of them during this time of uncertainty."

Having faith and acting on faith were particularly salient in teachers', schools', and even students' daily actions. Faith has not only "comforted" these teachers but also guided how they supported others. Participants noted the efforts of their school's campus ministers to provide further support to students and their families, "I think the student support differs in a spiritual way, but I think the public schools are also doing a good job of supporting the students, just in a different way." There was widespread perception that the Catholic school's process for supporting community involved faith, which offered a special way of responding than other types of schools, "I do think that faith helps the community and it allows us to respond to a crisis differently."

Faith and prayer emerged as important instruments in their vocational toolkit. Such instruments are not only essential to living a Catholic identity but also offer comfort and support during crisis. As one teacher noted, I do think that faith helps the community and it allows us to respond to a crisis differently." It is unlikely that faith and prayer are staples in the regimen of responses in public schooling suggesting that these behaviors when enacted at a school and community level are uniquely Catholic. Overall, teachers perceived that Catholic schools offered all-inclusive emotional, academic, social, economic, and spiritual support. As one teacher observed: "The idea of caring for the whole person has shone through," as teachers consistently reported a difference between how they realized the Catholic identity even virtually. "I think there is a slight difference, definitely incorporating prayer and spirituality practices virtually through Catholic schools, while public schools do not have this." Several teachers believed that integrating faith-based components during remote instruction and sending out morning prayers to families supported the "hope that faith in God and Jesus brings, and spread love on a deeper level."

Although the pandemic has heightened the need and realization for careful planning and preparation for what's next, as one teacher observed: "I have been relying on my faith for strength and continuity during this unprecedented time." Already established communities within each school, however, led to an innate ability and readiness "to take this on together" and facilitated a bond that enabled communication and support during the pandemic. "In a Catholic school, you are able to build a community with your students and family. There is a unique bond that is formed between staff and families that in my opinion makes it easier to communicate with and continue that community at home." One teacher likened the school's approach to family em-

bodied in the call to family, community, and participation, a Catholic Social Teaching. "I think there is a real familial approach. There is a hope and faith that is evident in the lessons and the religious aspect of teaching really shines through." Prior to the pandemic teachers had strived to live the call to community, but recognized how crisis had somehow strengthened the relational aspect of community members, particularly that between teacher, school, and family. "As strange as these times are, they have brought a new depth of relationship between me and the families I serve; we truly are working as a team for their child's education."

Groome's research (1996) elaborates the importance of how the clearly articulated mission of Catholic schools strengthens students' beliefs that they are valued and supported in their school communities. Across the board, teachers perceived that aspect of the Catholic school advantage as being especially poignant during the transition.

> I have seen the power of Catholic schools coming together a number of times. When I was in Catholic elementary school as a child, I lost a classmate unexpectedly one morning, we were in third grade and her mom was the school librarian. It has been almost 15 years at the end of the month since we lost her but the school community still honors her each year. It was probably the most traumatic thing that has ever happened to me but because of the community of support created in our school I was able to heal and grow from it. The bonds created within Catholic schools are lifelong.

It is certain that students and families are feeling the authentic care, support, and blessings teachers, leadership, and staff are sharing with them at a time of uncertainty and suffering, as "*The bonds created within Catholic schools are life long.*"

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Listening to urban Catholic school educators is crucial moving forward in the "new normal" landscape of education. Teachers themselves offered insightful recommendations for addressing current and subsequent challenges. Some ideas emerged from what they and colleagues developed during the transition while others were suggested in other responses; all could and should be implement throughout public, charter or private schools. Teachers and UCTC leadership developed a centralized compendium of effective

online preK-12 resources and websites. Weekly online masses, messages of faith, community gatherings, games, trivia nights, videos, broke the monotony and lifted spirits. Some school leaders assembled a list of resources available to assist families with health and financial needs. UCTC leadership also shared protocols for helping families get free Wi-Fi, but such measures might be ineffective if teachers are unable to establish initial communication with families. Teachers also suggested integrating technology use regularly into instruction upon returning to schools to enhance students' skills, providing instruction to parents on use and online instruction, creating a manual for parents and students to facilitate online usage, and establishing a protocol for providing students technology options, and a system for communication between administration and faculty prior to closure.

Other recommendations include establishing a parent communication tracking team or staff person as well as a classroom website which is introduced at the beginning of the school year. Also suggested was uniformity of workload, expectations, and grading policies across subjects and grades so parents are not overwhelmed, as well as an externally imposed daily schedule for those students able to follow a more structured remote learning experience, a pre-established schedule for tests, quizzes, and other assessments, and a centralized resource of opportunities for students to remain socially connected with peers. Of course, this assumes that students have access to Wi-Fi and devices. Fullan (2013) notes that technology has the potential to accelerate teaching and learning and curriculum and instruction. While some schools had the fiscal resources to provide technology devices to students prior to closure, the majority did not. What is needed is guaranteed Wi-Fi access and at least one functional device for households with children in schools. Generally, however, urban, Catholic schools operate on limited budgets and rely on benefactors and partnerships to subsidize curriculum and instructional materials. Federal, state, and city governments as well as major foundations must step up to provide resources for *all* children in *all* schools.

Limitations

This study solely relied on data provided by the UCTC members. Due to the current crisis, the ability to collect data from other sources such as school leaders, other faculty, parents or students was limited. While triangulation of data was not possible, there is anecdotal evidence from communications with school leaders, faculty, and parents that echo the experiences of these participants. It is important to qualify that these narratives may only be rep-

resentative of the experiences in dealing with the pandemic in urban areas of Massachusetts where the intersection of high infection rates, population size of marginalized groups and those with pre-existing conditions, cost of living, and crowded housing landscape may have augmented the disastrous impact of the crisis in comparison to other cities or states. Findings were presented broadly and there were clear distinctions and developmental differences in challenges teachers and students faced based on age, grade level, and subject matter.

Conclusion

This research sheds powerful light on the learning and general well-being of our urban students, schools, families, neighborhoods, and communities at-large, especially the marginalized and disadvantaged Catholic schools, students, and families that UCTC teachers serve. As we navigate these challenges, hoping for a prompt resolution, the realization that we must learn, act, plan, and prepare has never been more urgent. Blame is useless, forgiveness is essential, and change is crucial! COVID-19 has refined our focus on educational inequity and exacerbated the crisis caused by systemic sociopolitical and economic disparities so pervasive in our society. Perceptions are indeed realities. Yet these urban Catholic school educators continue to strive to address these inequities through enacting Catholic Social Teachings, living the moral imperative and responsibility to respect and protect the dignity and worth of human persons. Attention to sustaining community, promoting solidarity, perspective-taking, and empathizing with students and families, these novice educators exemplify actions that humankind must undertake now but throughout our daily lives beyond the current crisis. Although "Catholic social teaching is an ongoing effort to formulate an ethical vision that gives expression to biblically rooted beliefs concerning the nature of human life, the nature of the church, and the role of the church in society" (Himes, 2019, p. 284), these teachings are not only Catholic, but also integral to the survival of humanity writ large. As one teacher remarked: "My hope is that people are more kind and forgiving of each other when life returns to 'normal.'" Such kindness and forgiveness speak to the faith, hope, and love at the center of the Catholic tradition and, in turn, at the center of Catholic education. It is through the radical commitment to these values that our schools will be best equipped to find our way forward in uncertain times.

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