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## In This Spirit: Helping Preservice Teachers Thrive During the Pandemic Through Adaptation and Change

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*“New times demand new methods,” William Joseph Chaminade. These words reflect the lived experiences of two faculty women of color, identified as Afro Caribbean and African American scholar practitioners in education at a Marianist university. We share our different narratives of the experience from the dual lens of social emotional learning and culturally responsive pedagogy with our classes and students as they thrived during a pandemic. Included in these narratives will be a discussion of the continued community building process, exploration of efforts to learn more about the teaching profession, social justice and advocacy as we learn about others, and challenges encountered in creating virtual learning environments, as spaces to express themselves and dig deeply into their experiences as preservice teachers. This essay gives voice to the work of two faculty of color who found their work more valuable and accessible to students during these tough times.*

### Keywords

Marianist Characteristics of Education, social justice, teacher education, culturally responsive teaching, social emotional learning

“New times demand new methods.”

-William Joseph Chaminade.

These words reflect the lived experiences of two faculty women of color, identified as Afro Caribbean and African American scholar practitioners in education at a Marianist university. We accepted the mandate of the Marianist institution intent on preparing preservice teachers to meet the needs of all students. We are both culturally responsive educators whose teaching and research focus on providing access, opportunities and equity for all learners, particularly the underrepresented, marginalized and underserved. Hence, we are connected with our department’s mission to educate scholar practitioners who build community, engage in critical reflection, and embrace diversity for the promotion of social justice, as this truly aligns with our phi-

losophies of teaching and provides a great premise for our research within the Marianist framework. Advocacy then, is at the heart of our work. The COVID pandemic upended education significantly. Not only did it shift our physical space but tested our abilities to adapt and change our practices to meet the needs of preservice teachers. This essay gives voice to the work of two faculty of color who found their work more valuable and accessible to students during these tough times. Our roles in our department are strategically aligned with students learning in the first year, with a social justice course, sophomore and junior years with a diversity course and senior year with student teaching and the urban teaching academy. Thus, when the pandemic occurred and we were all under quarantine, we had to create experiences for students that sustained the quality and high expectations of our program. We share our different narratives of the experience from the dual lens of social emotional learning and culturally responsive pedagogy with our classes and students as they thrived during a pandemic. Included in these narratives will be a discussion of the continued community building process, exploration of efforts to learn more about the teaching profession, social justice and advocacy as we learn about others, and challenges encountered in creating virtual learning environments, as spaces to express themselves and dig deeply into their experiences as preservice teachers.

### **Teaching to Change the World and Then it Does**

When freshmen arrive on campus in the Fall and are welcomed into the department of teacher education, we introduce them to three essential questions: What does it mean to be a member of a community?; What does it mean to be a learner?; And what does it mean to be in the teaching profession? These three questions are grounded in the framework of the Marianist Characteristics of Education and provide a starting point in our program to connect teaching to social justice, advocacy and meeting the needs of all students.

Among the five Marianist Characteristics of Education, to educate for adaptation and change is often viewed by the preservice teachers as complex to interpret and apply in an educational context. Frequently in conversation with first years, you can hear them wrestling with the multifaceted understandings and nuances associated with this characteristic. It is not unusual for the students to associate this characteristic with the straightforward interpretation of gaining knowledge and growing intellectually as one matriculates through a school curriculum. Yet, even more powerful is the conclusion

drawn by Hoffer (1956) when offering his analysis of education for adaptation and change. “A school ought to be continually revising its methods, bearing in mind the complexity and instability of the real world. The development of new circum-stances presupposes on the part of educators a calm affectivity and respectful hu-mility in the face of truth.” (p. 113). Hoffer’s conception of this characteristic provides a wider contextual lens to view the work of educators while also recognizing the need to tailor our responses and actions to the people whom we are serving, which is where we find ourselves during the midst of the 2020 Covid 19 pandemic.

Charged with the responsibility from the university to continue to meet the academic needs of preservice teachers while acknowledging the myriad of challenges posed by impromptu distance learning, illness and uncertainty of future plans, embodying and embracing our ability to adapt and change became paramount.

The following recounts actions undertaken by two faculty members in the department of teacher education at a Marianist University which demonstrate how operating from a perspective of educating for adaptation and change not only enabled them to continue providing challenging and meaningful coursework, but also included the ability to attend to the social emotional needs of preservice teachers during a time of crisis. The exemplars offered range from encounters with first year students in the midst of discerning if the teaching profession is the vocation they should pursue; to second and third years who are broadening their pedagogical knowledge base and developing their professional mindset in terms of diversity, equity and inclusion; to finally encouraging and mentoring seniors who were in the middle of completing their student teaching placements and had the double challenge of completing their own course work while managing to work in collaboration with their cooperating teachers to offer educational and emotional support and engage students and families.

### **The First Year: Hearing and Heeding the Call**

Our programs’ introduction to the profession begins in the first semester with discernment, vocation, the Marianist Characteristics of Education and social justice. Candidates are asked to continuously reflect and identify how these four elements are integral to the teaching profession. As they are determining their career path and exploring interests, it is made explicitly clear that teaching is more than content, instruction and assessment. It is attending to the whole person. The academic and social emotional needs of the student must be addressed in order to fully support the learning process.

Texts such as Palmer's (1997), *The Courage to Teach*, Kozol's (2007), *Letters to a Young Teacher* and McGuire's (2017), *Conversations About Being a Teacher* serve as anchors for the activities and discussions we engage in to facilitate understanding and identify key elements connected with the Marianist Characteristics of Education, social justice and social emotional learning. Continuing into the second semester, we utilize Oakes, Lipton, Anderson and Stillman's (2018) comprehensive text, *Teaching to Change the World* to contextualize how social justice and equity are integral to teaching. We further extend the relevancy of social justice and meeting the needs of the whole child by identifying and deconstructing the practical applications of the Ohio Standards of the Teaching Profession (OSTP), the Marianist Characteristics of Education and social emotional learning (SEL) core competencies. Candidates are taught to observe and interpret the aforementioned standards and competencies in real time as they complete their first required clinical field hours. It is during this time of connecting theory to practice, that candidates are able to witness how teachers must employ practices to respond to the varying needs of PK-12 students and additionally reflect on how they too are engaged in the teaching-learning process (Rodman, 2010) and benefit from having professors who are responsive to their needs as an adult learner. Spring 2020 brought this recognition of their own educational needs to the forefront as the university closed and drove all to employ remote instruction.

The transition to offering completely remote teaching for the first year candidates was a daunting, but manageable task. As an instructor who frequently uses technology to deliver content and facilitate student engagement, my immediate focus became reassuring candidates that I would be available to support them as learners, and that we would try as much as possible to remain connected to each other as a learning community to engage in conversation, share ideas and make sense of the current world situation while exploring how schools can help support during times of crisis. Indeed, educate for adaptation and change manifested itself in the actions taken to continue delivering an integral quality education. Many of the actions and protocols implemented were identified to be effective and in alignment with best practices for adult online learning (Darby & Lang, 2019). Effectiveness was confirmed by usage of services as well as the positive feedback directly received from candidates.

Starting with communication, my emails to candidates increased 160%, from my typical 15 emails per semester to 39 emails. In addition to my regular after class follow up emails. Messages were sent to check in and provide

any new information or directions from the department or university; emails regarding changes in syllabus, required assignments and changes to due dates. Communication via email became an efficient and effective way to ensure that valuable information was received and to answer the myriad of questions students sent seeking assistance and assurance. Along with emails, I developed weekly virtual office hours. Utilizing a shared sign-up sheet that included all available office hour dates for the week and the video conferencing link for students to use at their selected time. To promote awareness of my availability and facilitate access to the sign-up sheet, I included the link in my email signature section. From the time frame of mid-March 2020 to early May 2020, I held 20 virtual office hours having 68 meetings. This far exceeds the number of in person office hours meetings I typically have over the course of a full academic year with students.

Using technology to build community, facilitate student engagement, deliver content and assess student growth was an important element to ensuring the delivery of a quality remote learning course. Several platforms, apps, websites, and e-materials were utilized to maintain course integrity. Adaptation and change required learning on the part of both faculty and students. Candidates were asked to view tutorials on using Zoom, Flipgrid, Warpwire, Snagit and Google office products so that they could be utilized in our synchronous class sessions. Together, we as learners, began to speak a new language using tech terms and sharing tips, apps and learning websites that could help us share information and make the online classroom productive for teachers and students. We began to discuss and evaluate the COVID-19 crisis as a case study in addition to the case study we were already discussing in terms of what is the responsibility of schools and teachers. We engaged in conversations that explored how schools and teachers can best serve students and families during a pandemic. At a time when all was uncertain and my trying to make remote teaching engaging and meaningful while adjusting course expectations and assignments, there came a new normal. A new normal that included video conferencing, online polls, hashtags, collaborations on shared documents, virtual classrooms that mirrored video games, waves and smiles from basements and bedrooms and in the end, learning.

While the end of the first year was not as anticipated, learning occurred and community remained. In fact, students offered feedback in their end of semester evaluations that confirmed my own opinion about how we were able to be positive and maintain rigor while learning through a crisis. "I really enjoyed this class, and felt supported when we switched to online learning and

zoom classes.” “Thank you for caring about the success of your students and having high expectations. I feel like that helped me improve my reading and writing skills a lot.... Also, thank you for being so flexible this semester due to our current situation. It has really helped me, as this is a tough time for us all. Thank you, take care!”

### **Second and Third Years: Builders of a World of Fraternity and Solidarity**

“The authentic educator should possess the power of adaptation that allows him to adjust to the student, who is in the process of becoming, just as he must be able to adjust to the evolution taking place in the culture.” (Leopold Prohaska, S.M.). No one could predict our Spring 2020 semester would be fraught with challenges of adjusting to the evolution of a worldwide pandemic which forced a lockdown of what we know and do in our professional communities. This was our harsh reality, an educational cultural shift facilitating a diversity course, where culture is explored as an inherent part of the studies, but now as a lived experience as the COVID 19 pandemic forced our students to learn differently. The Educating Diverse Student Populations for Inclusive Settings 340 course focuses on the characteristic of educating for service, justice and peace, and also adaptation and Change as in the following – “The Marianist approach to higher education is deeply committed to the common good. The intellectual life is undertaken as a form of service in the interest of justice and peace, and the university curriculum is designed to connect the classroom with the wider world. In addition, Marianist universities extend a special concern for the poor and marginalized and promote the dignity, rights and responsibilities of all peoples” (Characteristics of Marianist Universities, p. 20). This course is the study of the evidence-based practice in inclusive education where teachers are knowledgeable about and respect diversity; including culture and racial/ethnic origins, language, gender, religion, sexual orientation, economic status and learning challenges associated with exceptionalities. Our students are engaged in critical reflection as they gauge their intercultural competence and actively seek to improve their continuous learning, interpersonal engagement and hardiness to help them to interact and teach students from diverse cultures and populations. I was faced with some critical questions as we planned to support our students. How do I help students to advocate in the midst of a pandemic where they are fearful and helpless? How do I support those who are living the trauma of the COVID 19 pandemic in their household? How do I expose them to unjust systems of education?

As an educator steeped in the research of culturally responsive education and social emotional learning, I intentionally applied these principles to the design and facilitation of the sessions. How do I teach them to create democratic classrooms with a culturally relevant and inclusive curriculum so all students learn, being aware of legal aspects and social justice perspectives associated with the student's learning? Culturally responsive pedagogy is a "pedagogy of opposition not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment" Ladson Billings (1995). My diversity classroom then served as a site of empowerment. So, from behind the confines of a screen via Zoom meetings I continued to cement my learning partnerships with our students. As a culturally responsive educator I have always espoused research-based strategies such as mindfulness and trauma informed practices in the diversity classroom. Now I was actively implementing these practices for my own students who were living during a pandemic. I knew that this pandemic would affect our students since they were involuntarily charged to continue their education in a virtual space free of their own peers, human interaction, which is at the heart of the profession. This lends itself to some level of anxiety even amongst the most veteran educators. I also knew our students are considered 'digital natives', Generation Z who depend heavily on technology to survive a normal life. I considered this cultural capital that I could use to maximize their potential. As Lemberger and Clemens (2012) noted that a curriculum that is designed to support students' backgrounds can impact student achievement significantly as they will feel a sense of belonging, safety, and support in their learning environment. My students, though, had to invite me into their space, their social digital world on a professional platform. This posed challenging as I ventured into bridging the gap. Communication was the key in reimagining my class. My first and most successful strategy was offering flexible office hours. I was committed to building engagement with my students online far more than mastering technology. My students valued office hours as meaningful interactions to connect as they were intent on mastering content and assignments. It was also a space to find peace for others whose lives were upended with grief as they lost loved ones. Zoom meetings were honored and highly appreciated as my preservice students, hunger and thirst for human interaction. I facilitated mindfulness moments through music or expressions through emojis and hashtags, giving students a space to share their emotions and connect with each other. My students had created a community and established solid relationships before the pandemic which was the foundation that supported our learning community efforts during these tough times.



Exploring my own vulnerabilities, I shared narratives with my students as we grappled with the professional and personal lives intersecting, while focused on advocating for students' success. Students embraced their own vulnerabilities and reciprocated through various adjusted assignments.

No longer could students attend multicultural events as social distancing took that opportunity away from them. However, with the use of technology they were able to experience cultures beyond the boundaries of the United States of America. Preservice teachers researched and shared the stories of many students and educators who were affected adversely by the pandemic. This was even more authentic to them as they had classmates who joined from across the world as far as India. As one student shared "I used my research to help further develop my intercultural effectiveness scores of hardiness- emotional resilience, by gaining a better understanding of what people are going through at this time of COVID-19 crisis and how we all are adapting to this crisis and stressful situations." Students were already engaged in interrogating their intercultural competence as they navigate various cultures within their own society. Most of them shared how they used their research of world cultures to further develop hardiness and emotional resilience as they struggled during the pandemic. In essence, the virtual learning experience narrowed the cultural gap giving them a window into other worlds so far removed from them before COVID 19. As preservice teachers in the process of 'becoming' at a Marianist institution, they still had an opportunity to connect with the wider world in their quest to disrupt unjust systems. Even though they were fearful of the future and helpless in their desire for normalcy, their courage to teach was sharpened. I intentionally modeled and created a space where we were building trusting relationships, creating community, and responding constructively to conflicts across differences. These social emotional strategies, an embedded part of the curriculum, served to support students' attitude towards learning, increasing their level of participation and interest in the content. This quote from one student resonated with me "Due to COVID 19 the inequities in our education system were magnified. Marginalized and vulnerable students are victims." They wrote outstanding research papers advocating for learners with exceptionalities for example, students with dyslexia, students on the autism spectrum disorder, students who are gifted, students who are twice exceptional, students with hearing impairments, English learners and/or other students from non-dominant cultural backgrounds. My students cultivated perseverance and embraced their productive struggles during a pandemic while strengthening their voices. Through a reflective lens, they also were able to further affirm the value of

social justice and advocacy for students in a broken education system. Adaptation and change then, came alive in their lives as that was the only mode of survival for them. Who would have thought a pandemic would further sharpen the lens of social justice advocacy in preservice teachers?

#### Senior Year: Be Available and Respond to the Sign of the Times

Revisiting Hoffer's analysis of adaptation and change that "A school ought to be continually revising its methods, bearing in mind the complexity and instability of the real world. The development of new circumstances presupposes on the part of educators a calm affectivity and respectful humility in the face of truth" (Hoffer, 1956, p. 113). Our seniors immersed in education courses steeped in the Marianist commitment to social justice, were ready to demonstrate their dispositions in these changing times. These preservice teachers were torn from their new spaces, p-12 classrooms where they were practicing the craft of teaching with students. They did not have a choice but to adapt and change their practices immediately. The pandemic for them was the 'instability of the real world', their student teaching world which had promised to be the catalyst of their 'becoming' teachers. They were not trained to teach in a virtual classroom. However, they certainly were trained to adapt and change to meet the needs of their students. Armed with a growth mindset, they demonstrated collaborative relationships with clinical educators and members of the school community. With the guidance and support of their clinical educators, they continued to teach. They used a variety of developmentally appropriate technologies, digital tools and resources that engaged learners in the demonstration of knowledge or skills and extended learners' understanding of concepts. From the confines of their homes, they planned, instructed and assessed their students virtually. They graded papers and gave asset based feedback encouraging students to strive for excellence during a pandemic. The book study on *'These Kids Are Out Of Control' Why We Must Reimagine Classroom Management for Equity* became sustenance for critical thinking and co-construction of knowledge of meeting the needs of all students.

As one senior wrote in reflection "Right now, students may be experiencing some sort of trauma due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, a family member close to them may pass away due to the virus, a parent may lose a job and the family may lose essential resources, etc. Aside from the pandemic, students are experiencing other outside factors contributing to the cradle-to-prison-pipeline in which the book describes. These are going to have lasting impacts on student's that will hinder their learning inside the classroom. When a student experiences some kind of trauma, it can last

a lifetime and can lead to the development of behavior that can lead to low academic performance and incarceration. This is why social-emotional learning is so valuable in the classroom for many students. The ability to provide a foundation for a safe and positive learning environment through self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness are transformative for the students who need it most, making the difference in the student's life."

This statement is profound as it demonstrates how seniors were applying research based strategies in their program to inform their practices to support students with trauma and also making connections to their own learning. They recognized and articulated specific areas in need of advocacy, including the academic, physical, social, emotional, and cultural needs of learners. They witnessed firsthand the lack of adequate resources and inequitable opportunities for some of their students. The case studies, video vignettes, and theoretical frameworks from their first year up until this point came alive in their student teaching experiences. Our discussions then resulted in a deeper shift in mindset, which gave us an opportunity to consider restorative practices in classrooms as we examine curriculum, building relationships with students, parents and communities, in our quest to teach to change the world. As one student wrote "You showed me how to be vulnerable with students and build relationships with them as you truly care for your students." As students shared their great news of being hired via Zoom, or embarking on social justice graduate studies programs in Catholic institutions, the urgency of disrupting unjust systems fueled their mission.

### **That His Deeds May be Made Manifest**

A final example illustrates how our candidates embodied the Marianist Characteristics of Education in a manner that manifests all the good we know should take place in schools. We highlight the work accomplished by students who were in the Urban Teacher Academy (UTA). UTA, a long established program, which we co-direct, is designed to prepare candidates interested in teaching in the urban school setting.

Early in the response to the pandemic, UTA seniors experienced in real time how schools and districts need to be nimble and responsive to the needs of all stakeholders. Specifically, they participated in a number of initiatives aimed at addressing economic and social disparities that exist in urban school districts (Garcia & Weiss, 2017). For many families in urban school districts, daily life consists of being challenged to contend with a myriad of issues that impact their health and well-being: food insecurity, access to quality

childcare, affordable housing, stable family structures, low wage jobs and the growing digital divide (ICSU, 2011 & Mihaly, Dubowitz, Richardson & Gonzalez, 2018). Many of the district responses during the pandemic were aimed at mediating these issues. Our candidates did the following in coordination with their cooperating teachers to help support the academic, physical and social emotional needs of students and families

Marianist Characteristic of Education	UTA Student Action
Educate for formation in faith	Articulated and demonstrated through actions a commitment to continuing the education of their students during the pandemic Encouraged each other (UTA students) to use their faith and conscious to guide their actions during their UTA class
Provide an integral, quality education	Create and distribute take home packets for students to continue meeting academic learning goals Conduct tutoring sessions online Create video read-alongs for students to use with texts at home
Educate in family spirit	Participate in neighborhood drive by parades in student neighborhoods Send video messages to students Use social media to connect with students doing “challenges” and send reassuring messages of hope.
Educate for service, justice and peace	Help sort, bag and distribute food to students and families Connect students and families with local resources for food, wifi connections and essential worker childcare services
Education for adaptation and change	Create and lead online lessons and assessments Participated in planning sessions to identify services and support that district could provide to students and families Utilize various technology platforms to make learning engaging and meaningful for students

Despite a global pandemic and the interruption of their own educational plans and anticipated celebrations of accomplishment, the seniors we worked with demonstrated the capacity to think beyond themselves and give. They exhibited the understanding, compassion and commitment to their students that we have explored and encouraged them to develop since their first days in our program..

The COVID 19 crisis has given us all, professors and candidates, the opportunity to rise to occasion and put our ideals into action. The times may be new fraught with unknown challenges but it is noteworthy that the Marianist characteristics when embedded with fidelity to instructional practices in the field of education will prove invaluable to all learners. As an Afro-Caribbean scholar elucidating and modeling ways to engage students in critical thinking and action to spur emancipation and liberation for the community are keys to advancing social justice for the common good. The experiences of these preservice teachers will leave an indelible mark on their career, as they survived and thrived as active learners during a pandemic, strengthening their voices of advocacy and justice for service in an inequitable world. The emotional resilience and hardiness demonstrated by preservice students provide hope for our future generation of teachers, who need to disrupt the status quo and teach to change the world.

The timing of the pandemic coupled with the rising protests in America render the understanding and activism associated with the Marianists Characteristics just as relevant as they were in Father Chaminade's time. As an African-American female educator who has struggled through an educational system where at times offered little compassion or caring for my academic growth and success. I understand and value the power of the teacher. The teacher who accepts the call to be an advocate for those in need, and takes steps to inform and intercede on behalf of those who often have no voice. It is my mission, and it fills me with joy, to see our future teachers embrace and identify with ideals and beliefs that require more than just words. That they see themselves and the profession as something that is integral to the social justice movement. For me, it is the recognition that education is an act of liberation and that the responsibility lies with me. The responsibility to act, engage and model for our candidates all the things that we know make a difference in the lives of students.

It is clear that our actions work in concert with the Marianists' call to "Be available and respond to the sign of the times in faith (p.19)". Indeed, as they remind us, "The Marianist school, itself a communal learner, discerns what present needs call for, open to adapting Marianist pedagogy as needed in the service of our mission. (p.19).

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