



9-2020

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Recommended Citation

Fussell, R. D. (2020). Gather Us In: Building Meaningful Relationships in Catholic Schools amid a COVID-19 Context. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 23 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2302102020>

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Gather Us In: Building Meaningful Relationships in Catholic Schools Amid a COVID-19 Context

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, Catholic schools in the United States pivoted from traditional learning to a remote learning model to maintain continuity of instruction for students. This pivot has served as a catalyst for academic innovation in many Catholic schools. As Catholic schools turn their attention to the possibility of remote learning in the fall of 2020, it is important now to consider how remote learning impacts interpersonal relationships within the school community. This reflective essay examines implications of relationship building in a remote learning context using Cook and Simonds's (2011) framework for relationships for Catholic schools as a lens. By attending to the various relationships within the Catholic school community in a remote learning context, teachers and leaders together can take steps to ensure that the distinctive Catholic identity of the school community remains intact.

Keywords

COVID-19, pandemic, community, relationships, remote learning

In March of 2020, Catholic school communities were challenged in ways that none could have ever predicted. With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting social distancing mandates, Catholic schools in the United States took on the unprecedented task of pivoting to remote instruction to maintain continuity of their students' educational experiences. Many Catholic schools responded with grace, determination, and grit. Kitchen tables became school desks, basements became classrooms, and online meetings emerged as the fora for well-planned lessons. By the end of the 2019-2020 academic year, the COVID-19 pandemic was the catalyst for true instructional innovation in these Catholic schools. However, while instructional innovation is important, so too is relationship-building, and this is especially true in the Catholic school setting. Given the isolated, asynchronous nature of remote instruction, it is important to consider these broader implications of taking the entire educational enterprise online.

With uncertainty regarding a return to face-to-face instruction in 2020, as well as the possibility of a second wave of illness that may prompt a return to remote instruction, Catholic schools need to examine the impact of distance learning on the interpersonal relationships with which students are connected. After all, remotely or in person, the essence of community in Catholic education remains. Community is central to the mission of Catholic education, and Catholic schools are settings where students are to be formed as “persons-in-community” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 1972, §13). As the Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE] (1972) proclaimed, “the school must be a community whose values are communicated through the interpersonal and sincere relationships of its members and through both individual and corporative adherence to the outlook on life that permeates the school” (§32). This emphasis on relationships and community begs the question, what should Catholic school relationships and community look like in a COVID-19 context?

The Case for Intentional Community in the Catholic School

Strong communities are essential for Catholic schools to achieve their intended purpose. While this may seem to be an obvious and universal assertion for any school setting, Church documents and scholars affirm the essence of relationships and community in a specific Catholic context. Catholic schools are called “to create for the school community a special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity” (Vatican Council II, 1965, §8). Their *proper function* is community - one that is illumined by the Gospel spirit and that prioritizes relationships between students and teachers (Miller, 2006). A school’s values are transmitted within and beyond this community through a robust network of interpersonal relationships (CCE, 1972). From the perspective of the Catholic school teacher, this idea of community becomes the setting in which the teacher models the “kind of spiritual innovation which will manifest different forms of evangelization” (CCE, 1972, §23). In addition to teachers and students, a Catholic school community is inclusive of a range of other stakeholders, including parents, educational leaders, and non-teaching staff. All play a role in advancing the school’s mission through interpersonal relations (CCE, 1997).

At the time of the publication of this article, 60 Catholic schools in the United States have announced closures that are a result, at least partially, of the COVID-19 pandemic (CATO Institute, 2020). With the pandemic exacerbating existing concerns about enrollment and school closures, it is even more important to understand how the concept of *community* can be a driver for school choice and enrollment.

Parents value the tight-knit community of a Catholic school. According to a recent study commissioned by the National Catholic Educational Association, one advantage of Catholic schools is a strong sense of community grounded in Catholic values, and the quality of a school's community is a motivating factor that leads parents to enroll their children in Catholic schools (Mayhill Strategies LLC, 2018). These findings echo a similar study that found that of 18 potential motivating factors that led Catholic parents to enroll a child in a Catholic school, *a sense of community* was rated fifth (Gray, 2014). If the idea that nothing exists without relationships (Wheatly, 2002) is true, then parents who don't perceive the communal and relational value of Catholic education for their children will likely seek it elsewhere.

The Realities of Relationship-Building in the Remote Learning Setting

Normally, the primary opportunity for students to find their place in the Catholic school community occurs in the classroom and is facilitated by the teacher. As the Congregation for Catholic Education (1972) stated, "the teacher can form the mind and heart of his pupils and guide them to develop a total commitment to Christ, with their whole personality enriched by human culture" (§40). What is the nature of this relationship in a remote learning context, and how does it invite students into a faith-filled learning community?

While research on the impact of remote learning on relationships in PK-12 schools is scant, scholars have examined more thoroughly the nature of relationships and community in online programs in higher education. Unsurprisingly, cultivating community in these settings can be difficult (Lewis, McVey-Dyche, Chen, & Seto, 2015; Shi & Weber, 2017). This can be attributed, in part, to the isolation that students can experience when they lack exposure to the environmental cues and social interactions that would normally be present in a traditional classroom setting (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007). Diminished opportunities for face-to-face encounters with others limits distance students' opportunities to experience the positive culture and climate of the school community (Rovai, Wighting, & Liu, 2005). When one begins to apply these factors in a PK-12 context, the concerns expand to intersect with developmental needs of elementary, middle, and high school students. This is not to mention other challenges related to remote teaching and learning, such as the availability of technological resources to students and to the school, or the extent to which teachers and students have been equipped with the skills to succeed in a remote learning setting.

However, there is hope, as a shift in focus to more student-centered approaches to teaching and learning in the remote learning setting can build community between students and teachers in new and innovative ways. These directions prioritize the constructivist perspective that students can acquire knowledge by attaching new learning to existing life experiences. According to Rovai (2003), “A constructivist learning environment . . . is one that is learner-centered, where the focus is on learning rather than teaching, and where active learning and cooperation through discussion take place” (p. 90). Holz (2017) recommends that a constructivist approach in a remote learning scenario a) prioritize real-world scenarios, b) enable dialogue, c) call teachers to provide questions instead of answers, and d) encourage the extension of lines of questioning in the learning environment. Findings such as these have clear implications on PK-12 remote learning practice in Catholic schools. If Catholic school teachers adopt a constructivist approach that prioritizes learner experiences over the delivery of content, then relationships between students and teachers can be strengthened, and students will more likely feel connected to a vibrant learning community.

Embracing a Charism of Relationships

Noting the lack of an organizing structure in Church documents that makes concrete the essence of Catholic education, Cook and Simonds (2011) proposed that Catholic schools would be well-served to view their existence through a framework of relationships:

This will be a challenging century for Catholic elementary and secondary schools as they strive to maintain enrollments in a changing cultural context. We have argued in this paper that one way Catholic schools can meet this challenge is by refocusing their efforts. The framework presented in this article provides clear educational objectives and can be used to assist schools in this process of redefining themselves. The application of the framework to Catholic schools . . . gives educators a place to begin the process of educational change. If Catholic schools embrace this process of reenvisioning their purpose, they will be able to clarify what sets them apart from all other schools, more effectively recruit students, and enable their graduates to change the world by building relationships instead of fences.

Specifically, as noted in Figure 1, they identified from Church documents areas of focus related to relationships with self, God, others, community, and creation. These relationships exist in an environment where students are inspired to synthesize culture and faith, preparing them to build meaningful relationships in the world:

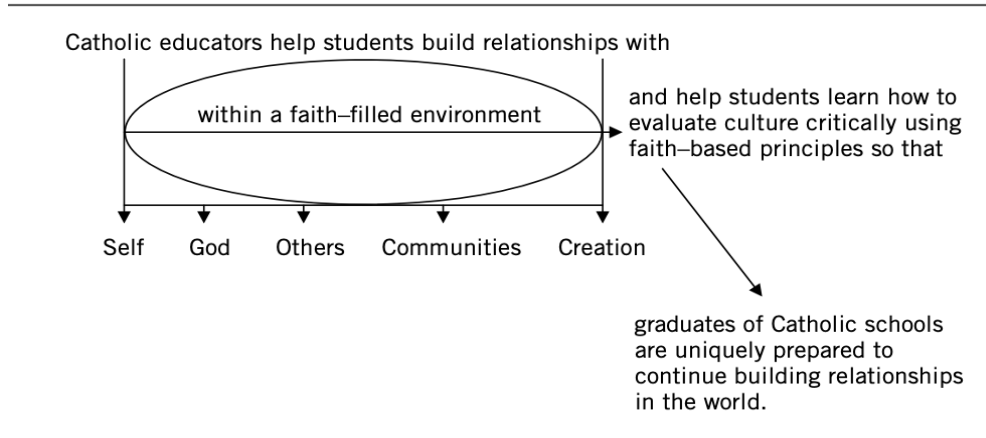


Figure 1. A framework for the renewal of Catholic school. From “The charism of 21st-century Catholic schools: Building a culture of relationships,” by T. J. Cook and T. A. Simonds, 2011, *Journal of Catholic Education*, 14(3) (<https://doi.org/10.15365/joce.1403042013>).

With the unprecedented contemporary challenges of the pandemic and their enduring effect on Catholic school communities, these words are incredibly prophetic. So, as Catholic schools continue to navigate the uncharted terrain of long-term remote instruction, a renewed examination of this framework of relationships can help to ensure that Catholic schools remain true to their mission.

Applying a Framework of Relationships to the COVID-19 Context

As Catholic school leaders and teachers consider the needs of students through the lens of relationships amid the current context of the pandemic, specific strategies for how students can build relationships with self, God, others, community, and creation are drawn into focus. Intentional reflection and application of these strategies can help Catholic schools to reclaim their school communities in concert with what we know about how students learn in the online setting.

Relationship with Self

Cook and Simonds (2011) stated “for a person to be in healthy relationship with others, a person must know and like him- or herself. Therefore, [their] model begins with a process of self-exploration” (p. 325). In a constructivist learning setting, we know that the process of learning is student-centered, where students discover meaning in the intersections of prior experiences and new knowledge (Arends, 1998). All Catholic school teachers in the remote learning setting ought to be intentional about providing students with opportunities to reflect on these prior experiences so that these intersections can be discovered. These opportunities can take the shape of well-designed discussion forum prompts, reflective writing assignments, or other authentic forms of assessment that inspire students to reflect deeply on prior experiences within the context of new learning. Moreover, the learning process should attend to the formation of the whole person, leading students to become fully alive in their “mind, heart, body, and spirit” (Simonds, 2006). Reflective opportunities for students in the remote learning setting should account for all four areas.

Relationship with God

Teachers’ efforts to guide students to develop relationships with themselves is not an isolated endeavor. Rather, opportunities for students to reflect on their relationships with themselves are always inclined toward a relationship with God. The Congregation for Catholic Education (1972) stated:

The Catholic school should teach its pupils to discern in the voice of the universe the Creator Whom it reveals and, in the conquests of science, to know God and man better. In the daily life of the school, the pupil should learn that he is called to be a living witness to God’s love for men by the way he acts, and that he is part of that salvation history which has Christ, the Saviour of the world, as its goal. (§46)

Cook and Simonds (2011) noted that for students to build a relationship with God, they must also build a relationship with Christ. One measure of whether a Catholic school’s educational enterprise succeeds or fails has to do with how well it enables students to build such a relationship. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2017) elaborated that “when we encounter Christ, experience his love, and deepen our relationship with him, we become more aware of our own worth and that of others” (§15). Moreover,

while students cultivate their relationship with God in the online forum, so too can they develop a greater appreciation of faith traditions other than their own, smoothing tensions to pave the way for meaningful relationships with others who may be different (Cook & Simonds, 2011).

Student relationships with God can be developed when faculty members serve as mentors and role models, providing opportunities for meaningful discussion and authentic faith witness (Cook & Simonds, 2011). To that end, teachers take on the task of engineering opportunities for such encounters in the remote learning setting. Miller (2006) affirmed that “prayer should be a normal part of the school day” (loc. 318). As it is in the classroom, so too is it in a remote learning setting. Teachers should be intentional about building meaningful opportunities for prayer into online learning experiences. This is especially important if access to mass, sacraments, and engagement with a parish community are limited due to social distancing restrictions.

Relationship with Others

As students develop relationships with themselves through prayer and reflection, they build a foundation to develop healthy relationships with others - seeking to understand the context of those whom they encounter in a spirit of dignity and mutual respect. To that end, teachers can serve as the model for the student, providing an example of how to build appropriate relationships with self, God, and others that mirrors what Christ wanted for us (Cook & Simonds, 2011). When teachers model this behavior, it inspires students to build similar relationships on their own (USCCB, 1972).

While opportunities for building relationships with others can come naturally in the classroom, it is a more abstract process in a remote learning setting, where the structure and order of the traditional school environment give way to a more ambiguous process of learning. Asynchronous learning strategies such as discussion forums have become staples of the remote learning model (Lieberman, 2019). While asynchronous discussion forums allow students the time and space to reflect deeply in how they interact with others, concerns about the lack of face-to-face interaction remain. Moreover, synchronous, web-based conferencing services that have become popular during the pandemic are also limited in how they encourage organic relationship-building. It is for these reasons that it is important that the teacher be intentional about providing opportunities for students to engage and collaborate with one another as much as possible - sharing previous experiences and collectively building new knowledge on top of that.

Relationship with Community

A Christian community is not focused solely upon itself. Rather, the community should be oriented in service to others, especially the poor, marginalized, and those who need it most. Student relationships should reflect this outward orientation toward the local and greater community (Cook & Simonds, 2011).

Typically, students build relationships with the greater community by engaging in Christian service work. This type of service work ought to differ from secular acts that are completed merely out of a spirit of general good will (Benedict XVI, 2009). Christian service is always motivated by the Holy Spirit; it is never merely a process for students to accrue service hours to satisfy arbitrary graduation requirements. By making service an authentic response to a social justice need, locally or globally, students will come to appreciate a greater impact on their personal context.

In celebrating his first Chrism Mass as the Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis charged his brother priests to “be shepherds with the odour of the sheep” (Francis, 2013). This is an appropriate metaphor for teachers and students alike. However, social distancing restrictions can impede service-related activities that lead to direct contact with others. With that in mind, teachers need to be mindful in the remote learning setting to provide opportunities for students to apply new knowledge to solve problems in the world. Bringing new learning to bear on social justice issues can orient students to authentic Christian service at a time and place where it is safe to do so.

Relationship with Creation

In their framework, Cook and Simonds (2011) were intentional about articulating the importance of student relationships with creation. They stated “Catholic schools must consider how they can integrate faith principles across the curriculum to help students understand these complex realities” (p. 328). This focus on creation was reinforced by Pope Francis in his 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, which calls for “a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet” (§14). Francis (2015) identified a number of settings where such dialogue can take place, the first of which is the school setting.

A focus on caring for our common home may seem natural in some subject areas but more forced in others. Nonetheless, it is important that students develop this relationship with creation, even if learning is occurring remotely. Teachers can cultivate this care for creation through interdisciplinary approaches that allow students to see how connections between various content areas can support this emergent need.

Bringing the Framework to Fruition in a Remote Learning Context

As noted in Table 1, bringing this framework of relationships to life in a COVID-19 remote learning context requires intentional action on the part of the Catholic school teacher. Instruction, both synchronous and asynchronous, should be designed to cultivate these types of relationships within the classroom setting. Moreover, Catholic school leaders play an important role, providing teachers with time and space to collaborate and plan so that these needs are consistently met in the remote learning setting. It is not enough for leaders to hope that it is happening. Rather, leaders need to take the time to monitor remote instruction to the extent that they are able to ensure that these approaches are present in instructional design. Finally, Catholic school leaders are called to make resources available to teachers and students so that these relationships can grow unfettered while students learn from home.

Table 1

Teacher Indicators and Leader Considerations for Relationships in a Remote Learning Context

Dimension of Framework of Relationships	Indicators for Teachers	Considerations for Leaders
Relationship with Self	<p>The teacher provides opportunities for ongoing reflective practice in the remote learning setting that allows students to connect new knowledge with previous experiences.</p> <p>Opportunities for reflection attend to the formation of the whole person - mind, body, heart, and spirit.</p> <p>Opportunities for reflection occur asynchronously, which allows students the time and space for meaningful engagement.</p>	<p>What system is in place to allow school leaders to monitor the extent to which students engage in personal reflection in the remote learning setting?</p> <p>How are teachers provided with opportunities to collaborate and learn from each other about effective reflective practices for their students?</p>

Relationship with God	The teacher serves as a mentor or role model, revealing to students their own reflections on their relationship with God.	How do school leaders provide the same authentic faith witness to teachers that teachers are expected to provide to students?
	The teacher provides opportunities for students to reflect on the presence of God in the world around them.	How are teachers equipped to lead prayer? What training are teachers provided regarding different styles of prayer?
	The teacher provides opportunities for students to pray meaningfully and offer intentions on a regular basis.	
	Students collaborate to develop and lead meaningful prayer that connects with prior experiences and responds to contemporary needs.	
Relationship with Others	The teacher uses well-developed prompts to encourage online collaboration among students in both synchronous and asynchronous settings.	How does the leader invite student feedback and input on the nature of their relationships with other students and with teachers?
	The teacher leads students in developing norms for online learning engagement that promote mutual respect, Christian charity, and human dignity.	What resources are made available by school leaders to teachers and students for online collaboration and relationship-building?
	The teacher models care for the whole person in individual and group interactions with others.	How does the school leader monitor norms in the online learning environment to ensure that they reflect Gospel values?
	The teacher designs instruction that is inclusive and respectful of the cultures and identities present in the remote learning setting.	

Relationship with Community	The teacher provides opportunities for students to apply new learning to current events and societal topics that speak to social justice issues.	How does the leader help teachers and students to understand opportunities for service?
	The teacher provides students with opportunities to address social justice themes in a collaborative way in the course of remote learning.	How does the leader ensure that service learning is authentic, and from the heart, as opposed to merely a transactional process that aims to accrue hours of service to meet arbitrary graduation requirements?
Relationship with Creation	The teacher accounts for care for God's creation in the process of curriculum design and instructional planning in the remote learning setting.	How does the leader monitor curriculum and instruction to ensure that students are provided opportunities to apply new learning to solve issues related to our shared environment?
	The teacher guides students in discussions about how new learning can be used to improve our common home.	How does the leader provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate across subject areas to design instruction that inspires greater care for God's creation?
	Teachers engage in interdisciplinary approaches that allow students to apply new learning across content areas in support of God's creation.	

Conclusion

The pivot to remote learning for Catholic schools in the United States has undoubtedly been a challenge, and the spectre of returning to this format of instruction in the fall of 2020 might be disheartening to those who crave the face-to-face contact of a traditional Catholic school environment. But, these difficulties have already sparked innovation and opportunity. Catholic schools have indeed grown in new and exciting ways. Perhaps with the knowledge that Catholic school teachers and leaders have gained as a result of the pivot to remote learning, Catholic schools might embrace new ways to deliver instruction to meet the diverse needs of a broader range of students. Or, maybe new experience gained by teachers and leaders might allow Catholic schools to develop intentional strategies to reach students for whom a Catholic education would otherwise be unavailable. However, regardless of where these

innovations lead, it may all be squandered if Catholic schools don't take this historic moment to reexamine and renew their identities.

Relationships are at the core of who we are as human beings created in the image and likeness of God. Pope Francis (2020) recently tweeted:

God created us for communion, for fraternity. Now more than ever the pretense of focusing everything on ourselves, making individualism society's guiding principle, has proven illusory. We have to be careful! When the emergency is over we can easily fall back into this illusion.

When the storm has passed, and when this chapter in the history of Catholic education has been penned, what will our response have been? Will our schools have drawn students and teachers closer together in this time of crisis? Or, will Catholic schools have slouched into a setting where the technology will have driven students and teachers further apart? This reflective essay makes the case for an intentional process of Catholic school renewal that focuses on relationship-building in the remote learning context. When Catholic schools enter into this process with courageous hearts and a purposeful focus on community, the unique and distinctive character of Catholic education can be preserved, even amid these trying times.

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