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A Teacher's Reflection on Catholic Social Teachings and Hopeful Curriculum During COVID-19

Cover Page Footnote

Kierstin Giunco is a full-time ELA teacher, and collaborates on a larger IRB-approved research study with an associate professor at Emmanuel College, which is based on the described classroom.

A Teacher's Reflection on Catholic Social Teachings and Hopeful Curriculum During COVID-19

Kierstin Giunco
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This reflection details the online adaptation of a robust advocacy unit that was grounded in Catholic Social Teachings. As this unit asked students to unravel single narratives and persuade others to take action, there was a seamless link between the original design and a "hopeful curriculum," which is supportive during a time of crisis as the goal is social-justice through solidarity and active participation (Renner, 2009) Through intentionally redesigning the unit guided by student curiosity, the classroom was simultaneously engaged with faith and social justice. Students became active advocates, especially through the intertwined nature of their topics and current events. This reflection serves as a metacognitive template for Catholic educators to design remote learning units that answer God's call to respond in times of need. Moreover, the concluding case study around a students' work, exemplifies the potential of this learning through a lens of Catholic Social Teachings and a hopeful curriculum.

Keywords

CST, social justice, remote instruction, literacy, curriculum, student advocacy

Thirteen sixth-grade students are hard at work on their research projects. Some are independently reading texts to locate information, others are collaboratively discussing topics with peers to deepen understanding, and some are reviewing notes to begin writing their research reports. All students were engaged with the essential question: "What societal concerns could be improved to enhance our world?" To explore this inquiry, students have self-selected topics of interest: immigration, race relations, militarism, environmentalism and animal rights. At times, they are working individually while, at other times, they are working with a small group that is interested in the same topic. Regardless, they were all becoming advocates for a topic that was deemed important by them. One student, Landon (pseudonym), serves as a case study and shares his peers' passion to leverage literacy to inform and communicate a need for social change. As a member of the group researching Black Lives Matter, he can be heard discussing counter-narratives found within his text and his plans to share

these with his community. Landon, and his peers, were buzzing with excitement about the upcoming “advocacy showcase,” which was their opportunity to share their learning with stakeholders.

Yet, these plans would quickly change with the announcement of the school’s “temporary” closure due to the COVID-19. There was immediate panic about the progress of their advocacy showcase, and consequently, of their opportunity to have their voices be heard on these important topics. Whereas instruction typically occurred over 75-minutes daily, online formal instruction would now be an hour per week; whereas class time typically included dialogue and questions between peers, text engagement would now occur without the immediate collaboration that was critical to their meaning making of these sensitive topics. As their teacher, I was faced with moving this robust advocacy unit to an online platform while maintaining the curriculum’s fundamental embodiment of Catholic Social Teachings (CST).

CST, Hope, and Curriculum

A Catholic school’s position on social justice can be articulated through CST, which emphasizes dignity of the human person, preferential option for the marginalized, and primacy of community (Storz & Nestor, 2007). Dignity of human life emphasizes respect towards each person as God’s child. More specifically, a preferential option for the vulnerable promotes commitment to actively serve those who are marginalized. Continuing with this ethos of care, primacy of community promotes a universal responsibility to increase opportunities for every member to reach their fullest potential (Storz & Nestor, 2007). Thus, CST encourages teachers to implement curriculums that develop students who are capable of analytical reflection and positive change, while imploring educators to be cognizant of their own critical social consciousnesses about external contexts (D’Orsa, 2013).

When a curriculum embodies these principles, students are simultaneously and actively engaging with faith and social justice

in a way that is meaningful to them, living as they do, in a particular cultural and historical setting, with the life chances this setting has to offer, and the constraints that it imposes on them in establishing their identity as individuals and as members of the community. (D’Orsa & D’Orsa 2012, p. 37)

Through this lens, a curriculum's role is to position students as advocates within a larger community and facilitate reflections around intersections between their learning and current events that impact those communities (D'Orsa, 2013). To anchor a curriculum in students' experiences, and thus ensure relevancy, student voice is essential. In turn, curriculum grounded in CST promotes student reflection, autonomy and agency (Storz & Nest, 2007). By allowing students to guide the curriculum, student engagement and respect for individual perspectives is prioritized. However, this work cannot halt after collaborative conversations; rather, authentic service must be the goal (Storz & Nestor, 2007).

The impacts of COVID-19, including remote learning, has highlighted systemic injustices that must be addressed in classrooms. In the past, disasters have promoted the uncovering of injustices, and schools have been identified as an opportune setting for students to critique and resist these injustices (Renner, 2009). In fact, a school that focuses on "rekindling these concepts of community, connectedness, and the collective is central to the thesis of social justice. That is, a hopeful path toward justice depends on the extent to which we can reinvigorate solidarity and a more active, participatory democracy" (Renner, 2009, p. 59). Rather than isolating curriculum, a "hopeful" curriculum is responsive to the external world through focusing on community, praxis and courage (Renner, 2009). Curriculum should engage with the community and analyze the roots of injustices amongst community concerns. Through intentional praxis of pedagogy, critical reasoning can be stimulated, especially when concerns are framed as opportunities to research and advocate. There is an element of courage that is required to act as an advocate, and to continually reflect with a critical lens. In sum, a hopeful curriculum's purpose is to authentically connect with others, research community concerns and take actionable steps that serve as a catalyst for change (Renner, 2009). When rethinking the advocacy unit as a hopeful curriculum grounded in CST, there is a renewed urgency to collaborate with community members, criticize roots of injustice, and ultimately, work towards the goal of students courageously taking action.

CST in Action During COVID-19

The advocacy unit took place in a sixth-grade English Language Arts (ELA) classroom at an independent urban Catholic PreK-6 school, serving 213 students (138 Black, 63 Multiracial, 7 White, 1 Asian, 4 unknown) with 21.5% Hispanic and 2% English learners. At the time of this unit, I was in my

third year of teaching, and was engaged in a two-year research project with a partnering college, specifically around this class' engagement and reader identity. Eleven of the 13 students received parental consent to participate in the larger study, which afforded the opportunity to reflect on student work during this unit.

During this unit, we defined advocates as people taking action based on their opinion, which is supported by evidence. Students were positioned as developing advocates, and as such needed to form their opinion through research. This research was framed as an opportunity for solidarity, rather than saviorism or pity, so that students would authentically feel the primacy of community and preferential option for the vulnerable. My hope was that students would respect the dignity of each human person when negotiating their own changing opinions, and the opinions of their peers. Prior to remote learning, students' conversations, journal entries and written reports were reflective of successfully meeting these goals. Yet, the rise of COVID-19 concerns and racial tensions created urgency to alter these CST-aligned goals and be explicitly responsive to current events through the lens of a hopeful curriculum.

As the media released narratives around COVID-19, students began co-creating their own narrative that was loosely based on facts. Conversations implicitly highlighted their increasing fear of the unknown and people different than them. As the advocacy unit asked students to unravel the danger of "a single story" (Adichie, 2009) and persuade others to take action on societal concerns, there was a seamless link between their learning and their emerging curiosity around COVID-19. As we moved to remote learning, I was concerned about students independently grappling with their understanding of the quarantine, and wanted to provide online opportunities for them to process their understanding. My first step was to invite two community members to virtually present to my students. The invited speakers, a zookeeper and a science professor, had been invited to the original showcase as representatives for animal rights and environmentalism, but in the new context we asked them to discuss how their work related to the global pandemic. The goal of the zookeeper's session was to juxtapose the potentially damaging perception of animal captivity in the wet market with the zoo's protection and care for their animals. The goal of the science professor's virtual session was to contextualize the original injustices that created wet markets and the inaccuracies of labeling COVID-19 as a racial concern. She discussed, from an epidemiologist perspective, the virus' universal spread, regardless of race,

and the students' potential leadership to prevent further spread. In both of these cases, I was hoping to highlight the primacy of community while respecting the dignity of individuals, especially those more vulnerable.

Although COVID-19 was not an explicit topic within the advocacy unit, these conversations sparked reflection on their own topics. Prior to these presentations, the animal rights group had claimed all animal captivity is negative; however, discussion of the wet markets led them to differentiate between intentions and reform their opinion to support animal captivity when necessary for the animal's health. Similarly, the immigration group reflected on the promotion of xenophobia due to the virus, and as their nonfiction text was around immigration policy, worried that this fear would negatively impact policy. Other groups, less directly connected to the presentations, also found themselves reflecting on COVID-19. The group concerned about militarism discussed international blame around the virus' cause. They made parallels between the United Nations role as a mediator, and their perception of the World Health Organization's role as a promoter of collaboration between impacted nations. On a more local scale, the Black Lives Matter group explored the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on communities of color. These students reflected on the close proximity of their urban homes, and a higher usage of public transportation, which they concluded put urban residents at a higher risk. Contrastingly, the group focused on environmentalism were optimistic about quarantine, specifically about potential gains for conservation. They were hopeful that a decrease in work commutes would result in less pollution, as well as a lower demand for fossil fuels. In this manner, students were reflecting on concerns that impacted all of God's children, current and future. When reflecting, they were connecting the presentations' content to their own social justice topics, and then crucially discussing ways to promote change. Through these unplanned inquiries, students were expressing hope in a time of crisis with a reinvigoration of urgency to have their voices heard, and position themselves as participants in the larger context of the world.

The original plan for their projects' dissemination was an in-person showcase, where they would synthesize their learning experiences into a formal speech with a call to action. However, that did not fit their more active role as advocates during this crisis, nor did it encompass the intertwined nature of their topics and current events. So, instead, the presentation's emphasis moved towards students' roles as advocates by indicating their plan to create change through written slides, as well as a link to individual videos. For these

videos, scholars recorded themselves reflecting on the unit, specifically their reactions to texts and current events, as well as reflecting on young public figures who were currently advocating for change. To ensure that students felt like they were inviting the community to participate in this learning, they created invitations that communicated the urgency of attendance; in other words, their invitations expressed a need for their voices to be heard as their topics were currently relevant and impactful to others. More specifically, students identified community members whose work impacts their topic and wrote them emails that described the projects' goals and why their attendance mattered to promote change.

Reflecting on the Curriculum's Uncovering of Hope

The goal of a hopeful curriculum is to engage students in social-justice through solidarity and active participation (Renner, 2009), while the goal of a CST curriculum is to engage students with God's community in efforts to increase opportunities, respect and betterment for all His children. All of the students actively engaged with the unit in these manners, but one student's responses were the epitome of hope, advocacy and CST. As the vignette introduced, Landon, an eleven-year old identifying as a Black male, was an advocate for Black Lives Matter.

Throughout the year, he was critically analyzing single narratives, and creating relevancy by connecting with his own identity. During remote learning, his group was especially consistent in drawing parallels between their researched historical events and the current state of our world. For example, when discussing COVID-19, he inquired about the treatment of patients based on their skin color. He wondered if doctors would prioritize white patients, either due to implicit racism or assumptions about financial status, and thus, Black patients would receive care at a slower rate. This question was sparked from the presenter's connection with his own reflections around his fiction text, "Ghost Boys" (Rhodes, 2019). As the main character was shot because police officers assumed he was a Black male with a gun, Landon was hyper-aware of the dangers around making assumptions. Once the police officer's daughter discovered the truth, she became an advocate for social justice, so Landon was also cognizant of the importance of truth. He connected this text's tragedy with the presentations as these corrected false information, such as Asians spreading the virus, so he was critical of other racial implications of COVID-19. While being critical of others' intentions, he had balanced reflections that indicated a sense of hope for unity between God's children.

At a time when tensions with police officers were rising, Landon was engaged with his self-selected nonfiction text “Black Lives Matter” (Edwards, 2016). Throughout the unit, he had debated police officer’s intentions as positive or negative. He would constantly go back and forth on his position, but his thoughts would always be resolutely positive or negative. This changed once he began reflecting on his non-fiction text and allowed the complexities of his inquiry to inform his opinions. He stated that his nonfiction text “change(d his) opinion on the fact that not all cops are bad. The book talked about how people start to distrust the police due to their actions.” In this manner, he was referring to the individuality of a person’s actions, rather than the group as a whole. He later mentioned the personal responsibility that we each have to learn about others, and how this text was one avenue that helped him learn. Through statements such as these, he was reflecting on CST’s respect for the dignity of each human person, especially those marginalized, and through the lens of hope, he analyzed the roots of injustice.

When transitioning to remote learning, the classroom discussed new opportunities to display advocacy, such as their showcase, signing petitions and posting on social media. This was underneath the agreed notion that their voices must be heard. When asked about his efforts to make a difference in the world, Landon wrote:

I want to stop single narratives. I don’t think that people should have to feel scared just because of the way they look. If we weren’t different the world wouldn’t be as cool as it is. The tongue is a powerful thing and they can break people apart or together. I would use my voice to tell people to not make someone feel sad just because they act or look a certain way.

These answers demonstrate his application of the lessons that he was learning through our intentional conversations around being an advocate. Moreover, his invitation to the advocacy showcase embodies a call to action as well as a call to hope. In the following excerpt, he implicitly claims that we are all united underneath God’s family and capable of change:

I thought that one way for me to be an advocate was to speak out against injustices for those who don’t have a voice. I tried to put that on my slideshow. Advocates have a great power which I want to use to show you guys a way that we can stop the violence and unfair treat-

ment. I loved sharing all my thoughts and learning with you guys. I felt like I was actually doing a big thing for the community as a whole. I can't express enough my gratitude to you guys and I hope that my slides were a good way of showing you how I feel on the way we should confront this challenge we have. I hope that you saw a good message in the slides and you can see the way we can stop racism together as a community!

Landon exemplifies the potential impact of a hopeful curriculum grounded in CST. His growth was indicative of his peers, and thus, his case study serves as a model of the growth that occurred in my classroom during our transition to remote learning. He went from a linear opinion that was disconnected from other social justice topics, to a complex opinion that examines others' individuality and his own intersections, both with racial relations and the COVID-19 crisis. This growth invited hope into his perspective, as well as increased his determination to take action for those marginalized in his community. All the while, keeping in mind the dream he shared in his video reflections: to become a life-long advocate.

Teaching Implications

As Catholic educators who subscribe to CST, we must guide students toward their fullest potential, and thus, their fullest contribution to God's world. As Catholic educators who promote a hopeful curriculum, we must guide students to contribute in manners that critique injustice and promote authentic change. During a time of crisis, such as COVID-19, these goals are increasingly important despite the new challenges they present. From my experiences teaching a social justice curriculum that allowed God, hope, and current events to guide its adaptations, I have learned the following:

- Students' curiosity of the world around them, and thus their inquiry about current events, should guide curricular topics and unexpected changes, such as this global pandemic, can allow students to feel even more urgency around their societal concerns. We can help empower students during these anxiety-filled times of crisis by giving them an increased voice.
- Engaging the community, both as presenters and as audience members, is crucial to ensuring that multiple perspectives are considered and with the current digital technology this can be easily accomplished remotely through the use of platforms such as Zoom, Google Slides and Flipgrid.

- CST can help guide teachers' decision making on how to approach a sensitive and impactful topic and can be embedded in curriculum even when they are moved to remote instruction.
- During a time of crisis, students will be inundated with the public's varying opinions about injustices, so the classroom should be a space for students to create their own opinions as well as a space that balances promotion of hope in God's universal love and actionable steps towards justice.

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