



2024

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Recommended Citation

Anghel, E., Giunco, K.M., Friedman, A.A., Rosen-Reynoso, M., Cownie III, C.T., & Hunter, C.J. (2024). A call to serve: Novice urban Catholic school teachers' sense of purpose in life, compassion, faith, and justice. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 27(1), 45–69. www.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2701032024

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A Call to Serve: Novice Urban Catholic School Teachers' Sense of Purpose in Life, Compassion, Faith, and Justice

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Ella Anghel¹, Kierstin M. Giunco¹, Audrey A. Friedman¹, Myra Rosen-Reynoso¹, Charles T. Cownie III¹ and Cristina K. Hunter¹

Abstract: Educators are instrumental in nurturing students' sense of purpose, particularly in urban schools. Consequently, these educators must not only have a strong sense of purpose but also possess other key virtues. This mixed-methods study explores these virtues among a group of 30 urban Catholic school teachers. They responded to scales measuring purpose, compassion, faith, moral development and agency, and completed a modified Youth Purpose Interview online. Scores were compared to those of the original samples upon which these scales were validated as they were also emerging adults. Participants scored significantly higher on almost all scales than the original samples. These quantitative results and interview data revealed unique sources of purpose such as altruism and compassion towards high-need students. Overall, the participants are strongly disposed to fostering a sense of purpose among their students and respecting the dignity and worth of all persons.

Keywords: teacher education, purpose in life, mixed methods, vocational discernment

“Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, but only by lack of meaning and purpose.”

— Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, 2006

Damon et al. (2003) define purpose as a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self. Purpose in life can mitigate the negative impact of stressors, both internal (depression

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and suicidality; Wang et al., 2007) and external (e.g., COVID-19; White, 2020). It also promotes positive psychological health across cultures and throughout one's lifespan (Bronk et al., 2009; Shek, 1993; Sriram et al., 2018).

Among emerging adults (Arnett, 2000), a sense of purpose can facilitate identity exploration, especially critical to this life stage (Burrow & Hill, 2011). Emerging adults' purpose stems from any number of sources, such as career calling (Praskova et al., 2015), faith (Liang & Ketcham, 2017), and relationships (Robinson & Glanzer, 2016). Among college students, a strong sense of purpose is related to positive academic outcomes (Sharma & Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018), engagement (Yu et al., 2016), and lower rates of depression and alcohol-related problems (Pearson et al., 2015).

A sense of purpose has deep roots in Catholic education. In "The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium," the Congregation for Catholic Education (1998) emphasizes the critical importance of the Catholic schools as a "place of integral education of the human person" (p. 5). Such education is grounded in Catholic Social Teachings (CST), a mission of caring for the whole person, teaching as a mission of love and evangelism, respect for the family and community, service to society, and ecclesia. Thus, it is essential that education centers on "deeply meaningful values . . . [and] on the [formation] of human person" (pp. 7–8). The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council described Catholic school teachers in *Gravissimum Educationis*, as ministers of the Church, engaged in the ministry of teaching which is a vocation. This call to educate "demands special qualities of mind and heart" (Paul VI, 1965), where education is positioned as service that is truly civic and apostolic by helping to develop students' "spiritual dynamism" and achieve "moral freedom," which "alone give meaning and value to human life."

As Catholic school teachers' commitments to these civic and apostolic purposes are demonstrated daily through their lives and actions (NCEA NSBECS Advisory Council, 2023), it is essential that Catholic school educators possess a sense of purpose that supports the Catholic school mission. This may be especially important in urban Catholic schools that face specific challenges. Additionally, given the importance of a sense of purpose for young adults in general, a sense of purpose can also serve as a positive factor in teachers' own lives, enabling them to foster an environment "in which faith, culture, and life are brought into harmony" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988). Thus, the sense of purpose in urban Catholic school novice teachers is of particular interest.

Background

Purpose in life is the result of multiple factors. For example, religious faith often contributes to people's sense of purpose (Ferriss, 2002). Particularly among college students, Kuh et al. (2000) found that denominational liberal arts universities significantly shape students' values and nurture the development of a sense of purpose. The power of religion to connect people into moral

communities may account for the role of religion in supporting a sense of purpose (Routledge, 2019). Indeed, social connectedness and compassion for others are strong predictors of purpose in life (Weston et al., 2021).

A positive sense of morality also contributes to purpose in life (Han et al., 2018). In particular, moral agency (the perceived ability to not harm others; Black, 2016) and moral imagination (the ability to generate possibilities for morally good actions; Biss, 2014) are conceptually associated with purpose in life as both relate to a feeling of control over one's life and self-efficacy (Chen, 2012). Moral imagination establishes the foundation for what Gadamer (2009) calls "horizon" or "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point" (p. 302). Ludlow et al. (2022) suggest there is "a measurable difference among a purpose which is immediate, self-referential, and more limited, from a purpose that takes more time and is socially referential, and a purpose that is quite long range, widely considerate of others, and reflective of some sense of ultimacy" (p. 4). Such purpose suggests self-transcendence which not only includes constructs of benevolence, compassion, and altruism but also purpose toward enhancing the welfare of others (Ros et al., 1999), virtues that contribute to beyond-the-self meaning and purpose in life.

Educators, especially in the current sociopolitical context, should be ethical leaders, inculcated in standards "related to moral agency, the ethics of social justice and responsibility, and ethical decision making" (Leonard, 2007, p. 414). Furthermore, as Etherington (2013) argues, teaching values is not enough as current "values education sacrifices truth in the interest of personal choice" (p. 207). He goes on to say, "... God is the best reason for doing right because He is by nature loving, compassionate, full of justice, and has the ultimate power and authority to place human beings under His moral obligations" (p. 207). The Congregation for Catholic Education (1998) notes that "The school is undoubtedly a sensitive meeting point for the problems which besiege this restless end of the millennium" (p. 6). Since the end of the millennium, Catholic schools and all schools have been charged to serve students who are victims of prevailing cultural, political, and social disruption: large-scale poverty, food insecurity, crime, deterioration of cities, insufficient or absent health care, and religious apathy (Paul VI, 1965). As Catholic school teachers are charged with enacting and modeling CST, educators should not only possess virtues that contribute to self-transcendence but also view teaching as a vocation of meaning and purpose. These teachings encompass principles of justice, equity, compassion, tolerance, solidarity, and stewardship of and respect for the dignity and worth of all persons and creation. Such principles support an egalitarian view embedded with cultural values of social justice, peace, honesty, freedom, equality and equity, responsibility, helpfulness, and loyalty (Schwartz, 1999).

In *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, the Congregation for Catholic Education asserts that the "prime responsibility for creating this unique Christian school climate rests with teachers" (1988) and the relationships between teachers and students are of critical

importance as teachers fulfill a unique Christian vocation and mission. If Catholic school educators are charged to enact CST and nurture meaning and purpose in their students, it is reasonable to expect them to possess these characteristics and to understand how they perceive what it means to model virtue and purpose in their practice.

Educators, therefore, have a major role in the development of meaning and purpose among young people (Damon, 2008; Steger et al., 2022). In particular, supportive relationships between teachers and students develop purpose in students' lives (Weston et al., 2021); such relationships can manifest in other positive outcomes, such as contributions to community, compassion, and morality (Battistich, 2005; Osguthorpe, 2009), and are vital to students' positive development (Giles, 2011). Furthermore, Pike et al. (2020) found that when educators used curriculum and instruction to instantiate virtues and good moral habits in their students, they practiced these virtues in their lives.

Novice teachers' sense of purpose and its related facets are of particular interest, as most novice teachers are emerging adults themselves charged with developing purpose among other emerging adults. Also, novice teachers are actively pursuing a career that is significant to themselves and others, namely, their calling, so they are actively engaged in developing their sense of purpose (Damon et al., 2003; Dik & Duffy, 2009). How one discovers identity, calling, and purpose can shed light on teachers' professional growth (Yazan, 2018) and their potential impact on students.

In spite of the importance of novice teachers' sense of purpose, on the one hand, and Catholic school teachers, on the other hand, no studies have examined this issue. Gökçe (2021) identified five core values preservice teachers indicated that successful educators should possess—virtue, understanding, equality, affection, and respect—but she did not investigate to what degree teachers demonstrate these values. Temli et al. (2013) examined teacher candidates' moral development, but they did not explore other key factors like sense of purpose, nor did they focus on teachers working in Catholic schools. Finally, Waters (2021) notes the importance of legitimizing, actioning, and building well-being in teachers; however, there is little exploration of preservice teachers' perceptions of meaning and purpose. Understanding how teachers conceptualize purpose and whether they lead a purposeful life can help stakeholders better understand teachers' professional and personal growth, thus potentially contributing to better educational and personal outcomes among students. Religion and religious institutions/contexts such as faith-based schools inculcate beliefs, values, and worldviews that seek to nurture positive identity formation and understanding of the connection between self and others (Lerner, 1996). Educators who view teaching in urban schools as a vocation are seemingly called to this ministry because they believe that education should serve the whole child, the community, and the greater good, requiring a sense of purpose that extends beyond the self to others and not merely a means to an end.

Current Study

Catholic schools strive to make students and the larger school community “aware of their calling . . . [to] contribute to the good of the whole society” (Paul VI, 1964). Therefore, the culture of these schools may be unique in their comprehensive approach of not only providing an academically rigorous, equitable, and excellent education, but also fostering a purposeful and meaningful mission of serving society and working for the common good. Given that research supports the important role teachers play in developing purpose in students and the challenges novice educators face as emerging adults pursuing their calling, knowing if and to what degree novice urban Catholic school teachers have formed a sense of purpose in life is essential. This study explores a group of novice teachers’ sense of purpose in life, their religious faith, compassion, morality, and moral agency. In addition, we sought to understand how this group understands what purpose is and how conceptualizations of purpose manifest in their lives. The following research questions guided this study:

- 1) What are novice, urban Catholic school educators’ levels of purpose and related constructs relative to the general population of emerging adults?
- 2) What does “purpose” mean to these educators?
- 3) How do they understand these variables in their own lives?

Context

The Urban Catholic Teacher Corps of Boston College (UCTC) supports and mentors licensed teachers to teach in urban Catholic schools. These educators commit to teaching in urban Catholic schools and living in intentional, faith-based community for two years while earning a fully funded M.Ed. in Curriculum and Instruction and participating in onsite mentoring and induction, retreats, and monthly reflective practice seminars. UCTC’s structure resonates with what Norton-Meier and Drake (2010) identify as a hybrid or “third space” collaboration: the intersection of teacher education, community, and university; UCTC offers ongoing, onsite teacher support, university coursework, and several communities intersect to support urban schools serving marginalized students. This structure enables teachers to become intimately connected to schools, students, families, and communities (Zeichner, 2010). UCTC seeks to nurture grit, resilience, and religious faith in preparation for leading purposeful lives (see Davies & Kennedy, 2009 for program information).

Methodology

Participants represented teachers in K–12 grade levels and various subjects. Participants were 77% female, 93% White including one Hispanic; the mean age was 22.73 ($SD = 1.34$). Eighty

percent of participants completed undergraduate studies in Catholic institutions of higher education. Teaching experience ranged from 0–2 years, with the majority being practicum experiences in public elementary schools prior to enrollment in UCTC. This was a purposive sample, as the constructs measured in this study are of particular importance to UCTC administrators as they may shed light on the characteristics of those enrolled in this program and persevere through the challenges of the initial years of teaching. Conducting research at the height of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic impacted the sample that researchers were able to recruit and possibly influenced participants' responses.

Procedure and Data Sources

All 30 participants who were recruited for the study completed a survey including scales measuring target constructs (described below) and 23 participants completed the Youth Purpose Interview (YPI; [Malin et al., 2008](#)), which was modified for online administration. Participants were instructed on their consent forms whether they were willing to participate in both the survey and the interview or just one of them. Upon submitting their survey, participants were invited to complete the modified Youth Purpose Interview (YPI) via an email prompt. Fewer participants may have consented to participation in the online interview as it was more time consuming and required more writing. The online version of the YPI was administered via Qualtrics and each question allowed for an essay response. According to Qualtrics analytics, it took approximately 15–30 minutes for the participants to complete the online interview; however, this should be interpreted with caution as participants could complete part of it and then resume where they left off.

Purpose in Life

Purpose in life was assessed using a survey that included the Claremont Purpose Scale (CPS; [Bronk et al., 2018](#)), and the Principled Life Scale (PLS; [Morgan & Farsides, 2009](#)). The CPS is a 12-item, 5-point Likert scale instrument designed to assess three dimensions of purpose—goal orientation (e.g., “How engaged are you in carrying out the plans that you set for yourself?”), meaningfulness (e.g., “How confident are you that you have discovered a satisfying purpose for your life?”), and beyond-the-self (e.g., “How important is it for you to make the world a better place in some way?”). A high score in each dimension means that one experiences a higher degree of meaningfulness, goal orientation, and beyond-the-self. [Bronk et al. \(2018\)](#) provided evidence of the score reliability (Cronbach $\alpha = .92$) and validity of the instrument and its dimensions. In the current sample, the Cronbach reliability estimate for the overall scale is $\alpha = .83$, and subscale dimensions are .84, .81, and .80 for meaningfulness, goal orientation, and beyond the-self, respectively.

The Purpose in Life Scale is a 5-item scale measuring life's significant meaning and a sense of personal framework (e.g., “I have a philosophy of life that really gives my living significance”),

where a higher score means the person's life is grounded on a well-founded set of principles. Morgan and Farsides (2009) report the instrument's validity and the subscale's reliability (Cronbach $\alpha = .86$). The Cronbach reliability in the current sample is $\alpha = .89$. Although the original sample means scores are unavailable, the original participants were 18–30 years old.

Compassion

Compassion was assessed by the Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale (SCBCS; Hwang, et al., 2008), a 5-item, 7-point Likert scale instrument (ranging from *not at all true of me* to *very true of me*) assessing compassionate love (e.g., “I tend to feel compassion for people, even though I do not know them”). A higher score suggests a higher level of altruistic love. Hwang et al. (2008) report validity evidence for the scale, as well as a Cronbach reliability of .90, and a mean score of 4.82 ($SD = 1.18$) among a sample of 223 college students. The Cronbach α reliability in the current sample is .89.

Moral Development

The Defining Issues Test (DIT; Rest et al., 1999) which assesses understanding and interpretation of a moral issue was used to measure moral development. Participants rank 12 statements that represent the three stages of moral development (Kohlberg, 1969): personal interest, maintaining norms (societal structures and relationships), and post-conventional (human ideals). An index or “N2 score” is calculated to reflect the degree to which post-conventional items are prioritized and personal interest items are rejected. A high N2 score reflects more a post-conventional morality (Thoma & Dong, 2014). According to Dong (n.d.), the mean score in a sample of graduate students in the United States is $M = 41.33$ ($SD = 14.57$). Rest et al. (1999) reported a Cronbach α reliability $> .70$; in the current sample, the Cronbach α was .52. The reliability for our sample is low which is likely attributable to using three moral issues dilemmas instead of the recommended five and the homogenous sample, thus cautioning interpretations from the DIT.

Moral Agency

Moral agency was assessed by the Moral Agency Scale (MAS; Black, 2016), a 15-item, 5-point Likert scale, where a higher score indicates greater moral agency. The MAS assesses responsibility (e.g., “I feel responsible for the consequences of my actions”), external attribution (e.g., “Luck, more than what you do, is responsible for whether things turn out for the best”), and group pressure (e.g., “No one can make me do something I know to be wrong”). The MAS has a Cronbach α of .85. The Cronbach α in the current sample is .73. Black (2016) reported a mean score of 57.69 ($SD = 8.18$) in a sample of 244 university students.

Faith

Attitudes toward religion were measured using the Astley-Francis Scale of Attitude toward Theistic Faith (Astley et al., 2012). Validated on 16–18 year-olds, the scale consists of seven, 5-point items, such as “I know that God is very close to me.” In the current sample, the order of the response options was flipped with high scores representing stronger faith, so as not to confuse participants. Astley et al. (2012) reported a Cronbach α reliability of .95; the reliability in the current sample is .91. One of the original authors (using flipped response options) reports a mean score of 22.9 among Christians (Francis & Lewis, 2018).

Faith was measured using the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire (Plante & Boccaccini, 1997). Consisting of ten, 4-point items, this questionnaire measures the strength of religiosity (e.g., “My religious faith is extremely important to me”). Plante and Boccaccini (1997) reported a Cronbach α reliability of .95; the Cronbach α in the current sample is .96. The original authors also report a mean score of 26.39 ($SD = 8.55$) in a sample of 102 undergraduate students. Although subsequent studies have examined the validity, reliability, and utility in multiple populations, in college samples mean scores typically range between 26 and 33 (Plante, 2010).

Youth Purpose Interview

The Youth Purpose Interview (YPI) is a qualitative measure based on Damon et al.'s (2003) view of purpose, designed to identify what is important to young adults, personal goals, drivers, and plans to achieve those goals (Malin et al., 2008). Holistic consideration of these elements results in four categories describing participants' perceptions of purpose in life:

- a) Beyond-the-Self Purpose (BTSP) includes all elements of purpose: a goal to accomplish, meaningfulness to self that integrates into one's identity, concrete action plans, and a beyond-the-self rationale for the goal.
- b) Self-Life Goal (SLG) includes all elements of BTSP but the primary focus is the self.
- c) Beyond-the-Self Dream includes all elements of BTSP for pursuit in the future as the goal has not motivated any current actions.
- d) Self-Life Dream includes all the elements of the SLG for pursuit in the future, without a tangible plan.

Data Analysis

Parallel analyses of quantitative and qualitative data were used to answer research questions. To address the first research question, we compared novice urban Catholic school educators' levels of purpose and the other constructs with the general population of emerging adults in the original

scales' samples using a set of *t*-tests and the scale scores reported by the scales' respective originators. For all quantitative comparisons, the means of participants were compared to the original means of the original population scores for each measure. There was no available original means for the Principled Life Scale.

YPI transcripts were collaboratively coded using NVivo; codes informed by YPI scoring manual criteria to address how participants understand purpose in daily life (Malin et al., 2008). Constant comparison across cases yielded themes and constructs that emerged. Since our analyses are parallel and answer different research questions, the study is different from mixed-methods studies (Creswell, 2012). Nevertheless, using data from both quantitative and qualitative measures helps illuminate teachers' levels and understanding of purpose in life.

Results

Quantitative Results

In comparing our sample's levels of the target constructs to those provided by each scale's originators, UCTC participants scored statistically significantly higher on all scales than those assessed in the developers' original samples, with the most significant scores occurring on the Moral Agency Scale, Brief Compassion Scale, Attitude toward Theistic Faith Scale, and the Goal Orientation and Beyond-the-Self subscales of the Claremont Purpose Scale. This suggests that this sample of urban Catholic school educators possess those virtues essential to enacting CST in their personal lives and the classroom. See Table 1.

Table 1

t-Test Comparisons of UCTC Sample and Original Samples

Scale	Mean (SD)	Original Mean (SD)*	<i>p</i> -value
Moral Agency Scale	61.9 (6.3)	57.7 (8.2)	<.002
Defining Issues Test	48.1 (14.3)	41.3 (14.6)	<.020
Brief Compassion Scale	6.2 (0.7)	4.8 (1.5)	<.001
Principled Life Scale	30.4 (2.8)	Original mean unavailable	
Attitude toward Theistic Faith	28.1 (4.8)	22.9 (7.0)**	<.001
Strength of Religious Faith	30.1 (7.0)	26.4 (8.6)	<.012
Claremont Purpose Scale			
Meaningfulness	3.6 (0.6)	3.3 (1.0)	<.015
Goal Orientation	3.8 (0.4)	3.5 (0.8)	<.001
Beyond-the-Self	4.3 (0.6)	3.7 (1.0)	<.001

Table Notes: *All original statistics were reported by or derived from the original papers introducing the instruments.

**The mean represents Christian participants ($n=6,649$) in Francis and Lewis (2018).

We examined correlations among the variables used in the study to see if the findings agree with the literature on the association between a sense of purpose in life and compassion, moral agency, and faith (see Table 2). Correlations among all scales measuring purpose were significant but moderate. Strong, positive correlations were found between attitudes towards religion and strength of faith ($r = .87$) and between both scales and goal orientation as measured by the *CPS* ($r = .31$, $r = .32$ respectively) and purpose in life as measured by the *PLS* ($r = .45$, $r = .51$ respectively). Compassion was associated with beyond-the-self purpose measured by the *CPS* ($r = .32$). The critical value that faith, compassion, religion, and moral agency hold in these educators' lives predisposes them to model these virtues in classroom practice.

Table 2

Correlations among the Study's Scales

	CPS M	CPS G	CPS B	PLS	SCC	MAS	AAT
CPS M							
CPS G	.36*						
CPS B	.27	.14					
PLS	.44*	.31*	.26				
SCC	.15	.34*	.32*	.12			
MAS	.24	.10	-.03	.17	.24		
ATT	.21	.31*	.15	.45*	.35*	.17	
SCRel	.21	.32*	.15	.51**	.18	.03	.87**

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$,

CPS: Claremont Purpose Scale, M – Meaningfulness, G – Goal orientation, B-Beyond-the-Self

PLS: Principled Life Scale

SCC: Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale

MAS: Moral Agency scale

ATT: The Astley-Francis Scale of Attitude toward Theistic Faith

SCRel: Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire

Qualitative Results

Excerpts from the modified YPI illustrate how teachers in our sample perceive purpose, moral agency, compassion, and faith, and their meaning in their personal lives.

Purpose

All participants in this research identified specific goals that informed their actions, but the type of purpose assigned by the YPI varied.

Beyond-the-Self Purpose. Almost 67% of participants' responses illustrated beyond-the-self purpose, citing altruistic reasoning to explain why they pursued teaching. One educator reflected on her daily life, "I strive to make a positive impact every day even if it is in small acts such as smiling at a stranger, volunteering, furthering my education so that I can make a positive impact in the education system in the future and teaching my students." Several identified leaving "a net positive mark on this world . . . [by] being a great teacher and a positive member of each community I am in. I'm working on my teaching career, and though each day is a challenge, I am gaining experience through each encounter with a student or a coworker." College experiences often reinforced this goal as several had volunteered during college, realizing that they "not only enjoyed helping others but [perceived teaching as a] calling to help others and make the world a better, more positive place in any way that I can."

One element of beyond-the-self purpose that emerged was connection with friends and family; this provided contexts that allowed teachers to be themselves and offered "support and love," "joy and comfort," and "emotional, spiritual, and financial support" to their lives. Many commented that families "have always been there for me through ups and downs and being back home with them has brought that love to the surface." Almost all emphasized their parents' commitment to assuring family closeness: "My parents grew up in divided households. Growing up, my parents made sure that my siblings and I were close and could always count on each other. All I have are my immediate family, and I love each one of them immensely."

Others identified different sources of purpose. Many viewed teaching as giving them purpose and mission in life. One participant felt that she "had been put on this earth to share her love of learning and to help children be their absolute best." Most regarded purpose in life as a "calling and vocation in life," "what I was called to do," or "what I am supposed to accomplish during my time that I'm alive." These constructs were related to another source of purpose: religion and faith. Teaching was perceived as God's calling: "purpose in life is the reason that you are alive and do what you do. My purpose in life is to be holy and live my life as Jesus did to the best of my ability, which is to serve others through teaching."

Participants with a beyond-the-self purpose generally demonstrated a well-founded set of principles, an important element of purpose (Morgan & Farsides, 2009). These values guided participants in spite of potential obstacles. Hearing "comments from some family and friends about the lack of money I will receive in my profession," one educator explained, "I remind myself of my values and that I do not want to teach because of the money, but to make a difference."

A pervasive principle that informed beyond-the-self responses was social justice. These teachers consistently identified a social justice orientation in describing the most important people and ideas in their lives. "Part of the reason I wanted to go into teaching is because I want to make sure all children have a chance to be successful in life and receive an equitable education no matter

what their backgrounds are culturally, academically, etc.” For some, this was due to some personal experiences with injustices that led them to develop this set of values: “I feel an incredibly strong passion towards being a part of the movement of justice for all people and [to have] a systemic and cultural change in our country.”

Self-Life Goal. About 13% shared self-serving goals. One educator stated that the “most important goal in life is to be happy.” Another attributed this goal to a “turbulent childhood” which made her realize that “lead[ing] a life where I am happy and proud of myself” and having “a job that I love and makes me feel fulfilled” were essential to her well-being and that she can only meet these goals if she is “truly happy with [her]self.” Concrete actions in the pursuit of these goals included learning “to speak out and up for herself,” meditating, reading, and seeking resources to improve critical self-reflection. Still another viewed “traveling the world” as a critical goal. She perceived having never left the country or being exposed to cultures outside of her own as “lead[ing] to ignorance, which is my worst fear in life. Right now, I am just working to save money and to put myself in situations outside of the comfort zone that will offer me exposure to different perspectives and cultures.”

Beyond-the-Self Dream. Although this stance acknowledges a purpose that serves others, actions are in the planning stage and do not necessarily govern behaviors toward such a goal. About 8% of participants were in this category. One stated that she wanted to “. . . make a positive impact in any way that I can.” Although she is expressing a beyond-the-self desire to impact others, “in any way that I can” suggests a lack of specific planning. Another teacher described a large-scale goal of moving beyond herself but, again, without a plan: “[on a] large scale [I want] to remain kind and loving [but on a] small scale [I’m] not sure yet.”

Self-Life Dream. Marrying, having a family, and becoming financially independent were goals that 12% of participants shared as being important in the future. One teacher wanted a family because she “realized how much support your family provides. Whether it be in school, in extracurriculars, at home, at work, family is always there to love and support you through it all.” Recognizing that this goal is not currently achieved, she describes a desire rather than a plan: “I want to establish my own family and provide the love and support that my family has for me.”

Compassion

As evidenced in previous excerpts, most educators demonstrated compassion and empathy toward their students, families, school, and communities. One teacher strived to ensure that each of her diverse students was “successful in life and received an equitable education . . . As a teacher who continues to learn, this goal will push me to always find ways to be a teacher of equity and empathy.” As most urban Catholic schools cannot afford a disability specialist, several participants were acutely cognizant of the impact of this absence on their students “who have disabilities that

affect their everyday lives. It is a problem that they struggle to get the education that they deserve.” Another not only demonstrated compassion for those with disabilities but also for those who do not know how to accept students with disabilities: “I have done a summer camp for many years that made me realize that this population deserves to learn and participate in society as much as they are physically able to. I think that the summer camp made me think more about what is going on. I was not educated or did not know how to interact.” Understanding that people often fear what they do not understand reflects perspective-taking: a first step toward altruism and compassion.

Moral Development and Moral Agency

Most educators' responses reflected a strong post-conventional perspective, showing care for others and universal moral principles. One was “working with [her] principal to develop diversity, equity, and inclusion as a whole school community at her school.” Another reflected a global worldview that is rooted in personally meaningful experiences:

My dad grew up in the 1960s in Alabama and South Carolina and saw how unjust the Jim Crow South was . . . he began discussing this topic with me early on. Since then, I have always felt a strong passion for promoting and working towards social justice. I want to encourage my students to embrace who they are and the people around them. There is no reason for there to be so much hate in this world and I truly believe as educators we must have these conversations with our students.

In addition to a moral stance, participants expressed moral agency and responsibility to avoid harming others. A few noted being “raised to not stand idly by while injustice occurs.” Several took specific actions that expressed moral agency: taking part in marches and protests, signing petitions, and donating to homeless shelters, food banks, etc. Most equated working in communities “harshly affected by systemic injustices” to advocacy. Participants' decisions to enroll in UCTC and teach for a modest stipend and tuition remission rather than salary despite others' critiques suggested a strong sense of agency.

Faith

That most of these educators expressed strong faith in action and thought is no surprise given that they opted to teach in an urban Catholic school and to live in the community for two years during this time. College experiences, involvement in faith organizations, attending Catholic K-12 schools and universities, and religious upbringing influenced this commitment to faith. For most, God and faith were central to their lives: “Without God I wouldn't be here, so it is important to develop a relationship with Him and do things that please Him such as caring for others.” Another observed:

My faith is the most important part of my life because it inspires everything I do. Every decision I make, every relationship I form, every day of my work, [are] all informed by my Catholic faith. It has shaped the way I view the world and my place in it and has given me a sense of purpose and meaning.

Discussion

Statistically significant differences on quantitative scales and qualitative data excerpts strongly illustrate that for these urban Catholic school educators, purpose “generates a motivational force” and disposition that is “habituated and internalized” which suggests virtuous behavior (Han, 2009, p. 293). Han (2009) asserts that purpose in life is a moral virtue because it contributes to true happiness and flourishing and “can be fostered through teaching” (pp. 294–295). A positive sense of morality (Han et al., 2018) also contributes to purpose in life. Furthermore, moral agency—the perceived ability to do no harm to others (Black, 2016) and moral imagination—the ability to generate possibilities for morally good actions (Biss, 2014) are conceptually associated with purpose in life as both relate to a feeling of control of one’s life and self-efficacy (Chen, 2012). King (2003) found a positive relationship between religion and adolescent identity development as religion and spirituality offer unique contexts for helping students develop personal purpose that transcends self and actively consider relationships to others and society. Anghel and colleagues (2023) found strong correlations between the purpose scales, moral agency, and compassion, and between DIT and compassion, but not between DIT and purpose. Educators in our sample scored significantly higher in comparison to the original samples on all measures. We also found strong, positive correlations between attitudes toward religion and strength of faith and goal orientation. This supports existing research on the relationship between faith and purpose (e.g., Dufton & Perlman, 1986; Pfund et al., 2022). As can be expected given the constructs’ similarity, we identified a significant correlation between compassion and beyond-the-self purpose.

The interview data also illustrate educators’ beliefs about purpose, compassion, moral development, and faith. All educators in this study voiced clear goals ranging from completing graduate education in order to “leave the world better than they found it” and working for educational equity. Most identified concrete plans for achieving these goals: enrolling in a graduate degree program, teaching in urban Catholic contexts, and participating in school and program communities were concrete plans to pursue goals. These goals were personally meaningful and guided participants’ actions toward goal realization.

The beyond-the-self component of purpose was especially salient in our findings. Almost 67% of educators’ responses illustrated a beyond-the-self orientation, taking deliberate action to accomplish the goal of serving others, which resonates with the literature (Damon et al., 2003). An

additional 8% identified a beyond-the-self purpose but did not identify actions they were taking to fulfill this goal. As such, interview results corroborate quantitative findings indicating a relatively high level of purpose in our sample.

Participants' sense of purpose stemmed from multiple sources such as social connectedness, calling (as in vocation), faith, and commitment to social justice. Many mentioned how family and friends contributed to their sense of purpose. As educators completed this interview six months into the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis emphasized the importance of family's and friends' well-being. Across the board, participants viewed supporting family/friends as critical. Caring for others supports quantitative findings of our sample's high levels of purpose in life, particularly beyond-the-self purpose, and closely related constructs such as compassion.

"Social connectedness [is] significantly more important for early career teachers" (Struyve et al., 2016, p. 198) as it may contribute to high levels of retention. "Being socially connected to other educators within the school is associated with a reduction in teachers' intention to leave the profession" (Karabatak & Alanoğlu, 2021). Educators who appreciate and sustain social connections with family, friends, and colleagues are likely to have a greater capacity to support social connections among their students and between themselves and students, thus supporting their students' well-being (Jose et al., 2012). Teachers are critical in creating environments that sustain important social connections not only for themselves but also for their students.

Results affirm a relationship between teaching as a calling/vocation and religious faith. That teaching was seen as a calling related to purpose is unsurprising, as calling requires the intentional pursuit of a goal that is important to the self and impacts others (Damon et al., 2003). Our sample mostly consisted of people pursuing their professional goals to contribute to the lives of others. The importance of faith in our findings is reasonable given that these educators teach and participate in faith-based contexts. Given previous findings that calling and faith contribute to well-being (Kim-Prieto & Miller, 2018), the prominence of faith as a source of purpose in our sample was expected. Many participants discussed their calling in the context of their faith, resonating with findings of other researchers and religious philosophers (e.g., Smith et al., 2021). Cooling (2010) argues that Christian teachers rely on religious principles of advancing the common good to become better professionals. Our findings revealed an identical sentiment from the perspective of novice Catholic school teachers and resonated with tenets of CST.

Addressing educational inequities and other social justice-oriented goals informed purpose in the sample, which is expected from those participating in a program situated in urban Catholic schools. Members of UCTC are also required to get involved in their school communities and neighborhoods where each living community is located. Recognizing their students' and communities' struggles given the pandemic-reinforced issues of inequity and barriers to resources increased participants' empathy for students, families, school, and communities. This shows

inter-relationships between compassion, moral values, agency, and a sense of purpose further supporting quantitative findings. Findings also support Han's (2009) assertion that purpose in life is a moral virtue as educators' purpose motivated and habituated a rationalized and internalized disposition that not only contributed to personal happiness and flourishing but also to the flourishing of others.

That the participants' levels of purpose, morality, moral agency, compassion, and faith were relatively high is encouraging from UCTC's point of view, as it strives to instill in its teachers: (a) the Catholic, Jesuit principle of *cura personalis*, "care of the whole person," which calls for individualized attention to all dimensions of each person (Miller, 2021); (b) high levels of constructs of faith, moral agency, compassion, and altruism; and (c) enacting a mission that respects and the dignity and worth of all persons, preference for the marginalized, solidarity, and the dignity of work in the context of vocation. This translates into a strong commitment to address more than the intellectual development of urban Catholic school teachers and their students as *cura personalis* calls on us to address members' and students' mental health, spiritual growth, and development as citizens of the world.

Our findings suggest that this sample of urban Catholic school educators perceive a strong sense of purpose which may have implications for recruitment and retention of teachers, and their longevity as teachers in urban Catholic school settings. The pandemic laid bare one of the largest problems currently in education: teacher shortages in the face of an increasing demand for qualified teachers (Watts et al., 2023). Before the pandemic, approximately 50% of teachers quit in their first five years (Ward, 2019; Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Papay et al., 2017). Since the pandemic, recent research has shown that prestige, interest, preparation, and satisfaction are at the lowest point in half a century for the teaching profession (Kraft & Lyon, 2022).

The various resource challenges faced in the specific school context of urban Catholic schools call for educators who have a strong sense of purpose and view their work as an important, meaningful calling. High turnover rates in urban school settings, especially urban Catholic schools, have strong implications for how administrators support teacher retention and the sustainment of purpose and meaning in their teachers (Przygocki, 2004). Although Catholic school teachers may view their profession as a vocation and derive fulfillment, meaning, and purpose from it, this does not diminish the responsibility of principals, central administrators, superintendents, bishops, parish priests, and the Church/school community to be good stewards. As teachers are responsible for student formation, administrators should also focus on teacher formation which means supporting teachers intellectually, socially, emotionally, and spiritually (Palmer, 1998).

Research identifies practice shock as a major factor in teacher attrition (Ballantyne & Retell, 2020; Delamater, 2015; Farrell, 2016; Moosa, 2019). Practice shock results from a major misalignment between teacher expectations and school expectations. When teachers are fully

apprised of and observe the school's mission and vision in action, carefully explore the context, interact with students, potential colleagues, parents, and administrators, and are fully aware of all expectations, supports, and opportunities, they are far less likely to leave. It seems that when elements of potential practice shock are addressed, formative supports are clearly present, and teachers bring a strong beyond-the-self purpose to the context, attrition is likely reduced.

Further studies are needed to examine what impact a sense of purpose in potential teacher candidates has on teacher recruitment, retention, and possibly the success or effectiveness of urban Catholic school educators. It has been suggested that significant turnover in a Catholic school may contribute to an unfocused Catholic identity in a school and significant efforts should be made to retain committed and more senior teachers in order to preserve a strong Catholic identity in a school (Convey, 2012). Urban Catholic school teachers may have a stronger sense of purpose than the general population which theoretically can provide them with an advantage in their capacity to impart this sense of purpose to their students.

Limitations and Future Studies

Our findings have several limitations. First, the sample size is small for quantitative studies and quite demographically homogeneous—white, female, middle-class—an issue illustrated in most studies in education (e.g., Howard, 2016) and pertinent to the majority of the teaching force in the United States. Self-selection is also limiting, as participants chose to be part of UCTC. The two-year commitment to UCTC is an intentional part of these educators' plans to reach beyond-the-self goals. Another limitation is that the study was conducted online due to COVID-19. Face-to-face interviews would permit probing and elaboration, providing more reliable evidence, but findings may still not generalize to pre- or post-pandemic contexts.

Although this study offers insights into how UCTC teachers understand purpose in life, our argument that teachers with a stronger sense of purpose facilitate the development of purpose among their students remains to be tested. Onsite observations over a period of time and interviews of students would provide evidence of teacher modeling and student assimilation of these constructs. Future studies should replicate this study on a larger sample of urban and suburban public and independent school educators, as intentional nurturing of the development of purpose varies by context and school mission (Steger et al., 2009).

Conclusion

Overall, results strongly suggest that these educators possess a strong sense of purpose in life. Finding purpose in life in the current social, political, and emotional contexts has never been more critical, as the pandemic, current socio-political unrest, and the increasing exodus of early-career teachers have introduced new challenges that require strong resilience against stressors. Educators

must simultaneously develop a personal sense of purpose, model instruction, and create classrooms that foster genuine social connectedness, deliberate goal-setting, service to others, and cultures of respect, inclusiveness, and dignity.

Such a change has important implications. Examining how an educator's sense of purpose impacts student's academic, social, and behavioral outcomes could inform how teacher preparation programs, school organizations, and administrators foster meaning and purpose in their teachers and their academic communities. In *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*, Frankl (2000) observes that "the more [man] forgets himself—giving himself to a cause or another person—the more *human* he is" (p. 84). Understanding, promoting, and developing a sense of meaning and purpose in all teachers may be a crucial step in not only recruiting and retaining urban Catholic school educators but also, and more importantly, fostering a sense of purpose and generativity in others with the goal of becoming more fully human, serving society and the common good, and creating a world "in which faith, culture, and life are brought into harmony" (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988).

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