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### Commentary

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## Commentary

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### Introduction

I begin this commentary with a question: *How can Catholic schools produce the circumstances that permit all individuals to be fully themselves and allow them to flourish?* Through my reflection on the articles in this special issue, I came to an understanding of the need for dialogue and trust in the Catholic education system. The articles in this issue can serve to stimulate discussions and begin a dialogue about how Catholic schools might better understand the lives of their LGBTQ students and teachers and how such schools might subsequently identify ways to be a more welcoming experience for everyone in the community.

In the article “You’re Not Like Everyone Else: Sexual Orientation Microaggressions at a Catholic University,” the author [Hughes] details the experience of microaggressions (both environmental and interpersonal) and the disregard for the experiences of LGBTQ students at a Jesuit, Catholic university in the United States. What becomes clear in the case study is the tensions present on the campuses of Catholic colleges. On the one hand, they are places that strive to be caring communities that nurture human growth, and on the other, they are alienating places that stultify such growth and even, in some cases, threaten it. The case study highlights the paradoxical experiences of the LGBTQ participants; paradoxical because both their experience of welcome and their experience of alienation have the same source: Catholic theology. Various aspects of this theology get implicated differently according to participants and the social circumstances. What the article illuminates is the important role played by university agents, especially professors and resident advisors, whose care helps their students negotiate the everyday experiences of this paradox.

In “Trans-Affirming Policy Potential: A Case Study of a Canadian Catholic School,” the authors [Herriott & Callaghan] consider the case of Tru Wilson, a trans student in a Catholic school in Vancouver, British Columbia. Their aim is to demonstrate how Catholic schools can base trans-affirming

policies on theological principles. The article points to the potential fruitfulness of the synergistic combining of different disciplines, of the prospects for generating novel solutions to complex problems through scholarship that transcends current disciplinary borders. Such work requires expertise in all the disciplines employed. While certainly presenting a novel voice, the authors may have benefitted from collaboration with theologians, whose expertise would have helped to better situate their work in Catholic theology.

Collaboration with a theologian also would have provided an intimate knowledge of Catholic moral theology and sexual ethics necessary for those who want to engage the ecclesiastical policies informed by them. Two notable omissions in the article in that regard were the theology of the body and any discussion of natural law theory. The theology of the body was first introduced by Saint Pope John Paul II and has played an important – and contested – role in many of the subsequent discussions regarding sexual ethics. Natural law theory, the belief that moral knowledge is accessible to anyone willing to reflect critically on human experience, is the basis for the Church's claim that it can “teach a morality which is applicable always, everywhere, and for everyone” (Gula, 1989, p. 220).

Education is a field of study that draws on others (philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, etc.) and includes many different intellectual traditions. The authors of this article offer an example of the positive potential offered by including fields and intellectual traditions not normally put into service by educational researchers.

“Homophobia in Catholic Schools: An Exploration of Teachers' Rights and Experiences in Canada and Australia,” by [Callaghan & van Leent] considers the experience of LGBTQ teachers in government-funded Catholic schools in Australia and Canada, concentrating on how they negotiate their understanding of equality rights on the one hand and these schools' personnel policies on the other. In their analysis of the data from their two different studies, they use the social theories of Gramsci, Althusser, and Foucault to better understand these teachers' experiences of their rights, the risks they face, and their resistance.

In many ways, the article serves as a case study illustrating the inevitable confrontations and power struggles between those educators with traditional views and those with different worldviews relative to gender and sexuality. Teachers are not isolated, and their understanding and attitudes relative to gender and sexuality do not occur in a vacuum. The construction of their understanding and attitudes is informed by the political and cultural milieu in

which they live and move. There has been a great shift in an incredibly brief period of time regarding cultural norms about gender and sexuality. And the speed of this shift is reflected in the controversies relative to personnel policies at Catholic schools and how they are implemented.

One area worthy of pursuit—and alluded to in the article—is to study how teachers resist. Erickson (2004) illustrated how for Gramsci hegemony is not so much “a solid mass” confronting us as it is “a fragmentary one that allows some maneuvering room for opportunistic bricolage” (p. 179). Likewise, “the panoptical view is not total; its capacity for surveillance is not so complete” (p. 179).

In a study on pre-service teachers learning to cope with a state-mandated social studies curriculum, I noted that

Chance offerings in classrooms if they are attended to and taken up can be used as such wedges, providing those in the classroom with opportunities to make incursions into the space established and delimited by authority, establishing room, a space, for their own work, their own project. (Connell, 2005, pp. 310-311)

What does this look like in Catholic schools regarding policies and practices concerning gender and sexuality?

As with the article “Trans-Affirming Policy Potential: A Case Study of a Canadian Catholic School,” more familiarity with theology, including ecclesiology (especially the relationship between practices of local churches and the Church’s magisterium) and moral theology (especially the contest between the two strains of interpretation of natural law [Gula, 1989]), would have provided a more substantive account of the dilemmas faced by the teachers.

More studies of LGBTQ students and teachers in Catholic schools that are at once more precise descriptively, more comprehensive in scope, and better informed theologically are both necessary and urgent. Such work would benefit from collaboration among scholars from all the relevant fields. Neglecting to do the hard work entailed in such studies will do a disservice to students in Catholic schools. Such inquiries into the experiences of LGBTQ students in Catholic schools in particular, I suspect, will help to begin to answer how Catholic schools can be more human, humane, and humanizing and how students in Catholic schools can be their whole selves.

Margonis (1992) demonstrated how the term “at risk” can be damaging because it locates the “risk” in the student. The articles in this issue of *JCE* have likewise illustrated how students (and others) are put at risk—put at risk of dropping out and worse. They contribute to the discussion of how better to serve students who contend with circumstances that tolerate only a very narrow distribution of the norm. Based on earlier accounts of students’ experience of school as an alienating experience (based on race, language, immigration status, etc.), I imagine that such inquiry will suggest that trust (or lack of it) is somehow implicated (for a helpful account of research on the experience of alienation and school, see Erickson et al., 2007).

### The Importance of Trusting Relations for Learning

Trust is needed more than ever in education settings from pre-Kindergarten through college. In an elegant and incisive article, Erickson (1987) described how trust is connected to learning by explaining the interconnection of Goffman’s (1967) essay “On Face-work” and the sociocultural theory of learning of Vygotsky (1978).

“Face” as understood by Goffman (1967) is a concept of the self, dependent on the values of a particular society and the norms governing social interaction in that society. The student’s concern with the positive perception of her by others in her proximal environment is a concern with “saving” face. As Erickson (1987) notes, the social conditions of classrooms are fraught with occasions that heighten the possibility of threat to face for students. This is because the students are novices at the learning tasks with which they are presented. The risk of face threat occurs in the “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978). This zone is that area of development that lies just beyond what the learner can do independently. It is the zone in which knowledge and skills are within reach but not yet grasped; that is, the area in which the learner depends on a more capable, knowledgeable, competent other.

The role of the teacher in this model is not to dispense knowledge or to provide new content, but rather to assist the student to move to a new level of capabilities, knowledge, and competencies. Learning thus requires the learner to put herself in the expert’s hands (Erickson, 1987). As Erickson et al. (2007) argued, “To try to learn something new with a teacher is to display one’s self to the teacher as incompletely competent. . . . Taking the risk of face threat, then, is necessary if one is to attempt a new skill” (pp. 11–12).

Lave and Wenger (1993) note that relationships that are coercive, adversarial, or overly demanding serve to “distort, partially or completely, the prospects for learning in practice” (p. 76). By its nature, learning in a social situation like a classroom requires the learner to be vulnerable, and this requisite vulnerability in turn necessitates a sort of trust in the benevolence of those others present, trust that one’s welfare will be protected and nurtured. Trust is a precondition for positive educational outcomes for all students.

### **A Catholic Understanding of Trust**

Among the most radical claims of Judeo-Christian belief is that the human person is made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26). This claim serves as the foundation for the Church’s constant affirmation that the dignity of the human person is absolute, inherent, and inviolable. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church articulates it, “Being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone” (par. 357). The social teaching of the Catholic Church guides its members’ relationships with the world. For Catholic educators this means recognizing the human dignity of their students as equal to their own.

To be human is to be a social being. When Aristotle (350 B.C.E./1984) asserted that the human person is a political animal, he was underscoring how our lives are knitted together socially. To appreciate how our lives are bound up with one another is to appreciate the importance of solidarity, the recognition that human interdependence is not only “a necessary fact but also a positive value in our lives” (Massaro, 2000, p. 121).

Trust is located at the nexus of the recognition that the human individual has inherent dignity and the recognition of the fact and value of solidarity. This relational trust considered from the teacher’s side looks like care. Effective teaching depends on deep, caring relationships. In the absence of such authentic care, students—especially students viewed as different—easily become alienated from school. Andrade (2009) cites the saying that “Students don’t care what you know until they know that you care” to capture the research that underscores the importance of these trusting, caring relationships between students and teachers, essential for effective classrooms. What makes care authentic is its particularity. It is the care for each student in their distinct circumstances. Caring for the generic student is easy; caring for the student suffering on the periphery or angry at the margins is potentially more difficult but just as necessary.

Pope Francis has suggested that the antidote to alienation is “encounter,” and he repeatedly urges the faithful to create a “culture of encounter,” marked by outreach, dialogue, and engagement (Francis, 2013, 2015). The emphasis on encounter underscores his belief in the transforming power of relationships. Catholic schools that foster such a culture in their practices provide opportunities for their members (parents, students, teachers, staff, etc.) to share with one another their experiences, values, hopes, and fears, and this sharing in turn creates the circumstances for the sort of community where differences are bridged, trust is developed, and bonds of solidarity are established, the very conditions that sustain learning.

Recently a Catholic bishop tweeted that Catholics should “not support or attend LGBTQ ‘Pride Month’ events” and noted his particular concern that “They [the events] are especially harmful for children” (ThomasJTobin, 2019, June 1). As the articles in this special issue of JoCE demonstrate, it is just such biased attitudes and practices that stigmatize LGBTQ individuals and put them at great risk of harm. Pope Francis’s counsel in his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) is pertinent in this regard:

[T]he Church must be particularly concerned to offer understanding, comfort and acceptance, rather than imposing straightaway a set of rules that only lead people to feel judged and abandoned by the very Mother called to show them God’s mercy. Rather than offering the healing power of grace and the light of the Gospel message, some would “indoctrinate” that message, turning it into “dead stones to be hurled at others.” (para. 49)

As I noted above, recent scholarship on teaching has demonstrated the importance of trust for learning. It is difficult to trust when stones are being hurled at you.

### **In Conclusion: Teaching and Learning in Catholic Schools**

I am not a theologian. I have been trained as an anthropologist of education, and my scholarship has focused on how people (especially adults) learn in school settings (Connell, 2005, 2010, 2013, 2014). I think the social sciences can assist the Church not only in its understanding of the experience of members of the LGBTQ community but also in its understanding of its role as teacher.



In his writings on modernity, the British social theorist Anthony Giddens (1991) has claimed that while there are in late modern industrial societies many claimants to authority, there are in fact no determinant authorities – including religious ones. Giddens’s claim is not a theological one but rather a phenomenological one. In an earlier time, religion, the kinship system, and the local community all served as sources for “binding doctrines” and normed behavior. He notes that pre-modern forms of authority served to help people respond to the unpredictable nature of daily life and to the experience of helplessness in the face of events outside of human control. In the modern era these forms of traditional authority have become authorities among others, part of an “indefinite pluralism of expertise” (p. 195).

The problem presently facing the bishops—including the Bishop of Rome and the heads of various dicasteries serving him—is that the traditional sense of authority afforded by the Church hierarchy no longer carries the same weight it once did; bishops are “experts” among other experts vying for deferential respect. Again, I am not making a theological assertion but am rather making an observation about a modern phenomenon. Whereas in an earlier age authority served as an alternative to doubt, in the modern era doubt (i.e., skepticism) becomes a tool serving to assist a person in assessing the claims of rival authorities. The claims of competing authorities are winnowed by means of a skeptical outlook. Practically, what this means in everyday life is that authorities must “earn” consent, and in this regard, trust is implicated in the relationship between a lay person (understood broadly) and the experts/authorities of any given domain—including faith (Giddens, 1991).

This is all to say that theological claims to authority by bishops based on apostolic succession cannot bear the weight of modernity—both for the reason explained above and because the moral authority of the episcopacy has been compromised by the complicity of so many bishops in the cover-up of the rape of children and of other abuses of power and conscience.

Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of the authoritative word offers a way to think about the role of authority in teaching, learning, and believing:

Authoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it. It enters our verbal consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass; one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it. It is indissolubly fused with its authority—with po-



litical power, an institution, a person—and it stands and falls together with that authority. One cannot divide it up—and agree with one part, accept but not completely another part, reject utterly a third. (p. 343)

Coming from a distant place, the authoritative word does not recognize local practices that allow play with context, borders, transitions, or variants. Such demands, as Lave and Wenger (1993) note, can serve to “distort, partially or completely, the prospects for learning in practice” (p. 76).

Whereas for Bakhtin (1981) the authoritative word forbids this dynamic between words, that very dynamic is constitutive of the internally persuasive word. The authoritative word operates by maintaining distance; the internally persuasive word by encouraging contact. The authoritative word imposes itself as the last word, the only voice. But the less powerful continue to make incursions wherever there are opportunities to do so, wherever there are holes in the defense of the authoritative word through which other voices might squeeze. Such voices revel in the struggle for meaning where the authoritative voice disdains such, for struggle upsets order. Bakhtin (1981) describes this struggle:

A conversation with an internally persuasive word that one has begun may continue, but it takes on another character: it is questioned, it is put in a new situation in order to expose its weak sides, to get a feel for its boundaries, to experience it physically as an object. (p. 348)

The internally persuasive word permits what the authoritative does not: a struggle among voices in which the exposition of the voices “expounds another’s thought in the style of that thought even while applying it to new material, to another way of posing the problem; it conducts experiments and gets solutions in the language of another’s discourse” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345).

As I put the finishing touches on this commentary, the Congregation for Catholic Education published “Male and Female he Created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education” (2019), a document described by Vatican News “as an instrument to help guide Catholic contributions to the ongoing debate about human sexuality, and to address the challenges that emerge from gender ideology” (Donnini, 2019). The document concludes with an appeal to dialogue:

[T]he *path of dialogue*, which involves listening, reasoning and proposing, appears the most effective way towards a positive transformation of concerns and misunderstandings, as well as a resource that in itself can help develop a network of relationships that is both more open and more human.

An approach to Church teaching and practice marked by dialogue, including taking sincere account of the experience of those whom such teaching concerns is an intriguing starting point that might begin to add to the discourse and address the concerns of the authors of the articles in this special issue of *JoCE*.

I imagine some (maybe even many) might fear this way of proceeding because allowing such an approach to happen potentially sets in motion a radical transformation. To paraphrase Rogoff (1994) and Wells (1999), engaging such an approach to teaching means that instead of being an institution that transmits knowledge to passive receivers, the Church becomes a *community of inquiry*, a community in which all participants—bishops and faithful together according to their charisms—seek to understand God’s will in light of the Gospel and the Tradition of the Church. With such an appreciation for the dialogic, *ecclesia docens* (the teaching Church) shifts from teaching by telling to learning by talking (*ecclesia discens*, the learning Church); that is, in dialogue. And such a dialogue will not only be a resource for answering the question how Catholic schools can produce the circumstances that permit and foster their LGBTQ students to flourish, it will itself be a foundational condition for such development.

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