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Endeavoring a Critical and Thoughtful Response During and Beyond COVID-19: Community-Based Justice Work in a Catholic University

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The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting quarantines around the globe have required social justice educators to respond to the unprecedented challenges and the needs of the communities they serve more than ever before. This article explores how educators in a Catholic University conducted community-based justice work in response to the challenges of the pandemic by integrating educators' solidarity with faith and social justice commitments. We introduce the Lift as You Climb (Lift) project as one example of our approach with Catholic value of promoting human rights and common good. We offer reflections on challenges and successes of community-based programming, considerations of issues of equity and access to educational resources, as well as recommendations for educators' next actions, in order to offer insight into the implementation of community-based justice work during and beyond COVID-19.

Keywords

Social justice, community partnerships, COVID-19, critical reflection

The steady prognosis of the current moment is one of stasis, one of remote learning and working from home; all amidst the continued calls for economic recovery, an opening of shuttered doors. The disruption of COVID-19 has impacted all of us in some way. Behind and beyond being “remote” are the students, the people and communities hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. Largely people and communities of color (Bibbins-Domingo, 2020); largely the economically vulnerable (Anyane-Yebo, Sato, & Sakuraba, 2020): those hardest hit by the pandemic must find ways to continue their lives—that means schooling, work, and caring for loved ones. Based on the Catholic principal of social justice, individuals hold the responsibilities to

stay in solidarity with, recognize human dignity, serve marginalized population, and promote the common good (Aldana, 2016; Kabadi, 2015). At this unprecedented moment, educators in Catholic schools play an essential role in addressing social inequities and cultivating social conscience.

In this article we share the impact of COVID-19 on a program designed to enliven social justice practices in educators and counselors. Developed in the context of the university's College of Education, Lift as You Climb (Lift) provides community where there can be a disconnect—between students at various educational levels, between faculty and students, between students and university, and between community and university. Lift began during the 2017-2018 academic year. Designed by instructors, doctoral students and staff, the program—in the legacy of movements for social justice—draws upon calls for critical and thoughtful leadership in education and beyond. Its premise and purpose is one of collaboration toward social change. That collaboration, among students in that College of Education (at all levels, from undergraduate to doctoral to alumni), community leaders and organizations, set into motion a series of projects (e.g., a literacy/book fair, a community-based podcast, and support to first generation college students) that centered participant thought and action in conjunction with a growing understanding of community concerns and needs. These projects, undertaken and presented in the first year of the program, allowed Lift leadership (the research team) the opportunity to develop and grow the structure of Lift.

In its second year, Lift worked with two local organizations in the Chicagoland area—one, a Catholic social services organization embedded in its community's work toward peace and opportunity, and the second, an alternative high school in that same community. Leveraging feedback from year one, Lift leadership endeavored to provide participants with clear objectives and actionable knowledge about Chicago's racial and economic disparities, about civic leadership and what partnering with community organizations can stir within individuals and the collectives at work. The second year of Lift introduced participants to its current community partners. Groups of Lift participants organized a young mothers' retreat and developed an audio documentary about community-police relations centering the voices of the high school students and teachers.

During the third year of Lift, Lift participants worked with the same community organizations—to host another young women's retreat and to develop and implement curriculum for high school students that centered their lives and experiences under the canopy of action research. We were

able to develop, due to the hard work of Lift participants, curriculum that focused on student well-being and the prospect of an action research project. We were, before COVID-19, in the midst of developing bonds with students and staff at the high school, formulating questions, conducting preliminary research, and building the frame for an action research project centered on an issue in the community, one acknowledged and chosen by the high school students. We met weekly with high school students and staff. At our last meeting before the school closed its doors to non-essential visitors due to the growing concerns of COVID-19, we brainstormed issues of concern to the high school students—from poverty, vacant property, and the criminal justice system to gun violence and a lack of resources (e.g., educational and employment opportunities). We asked everyone in attendance, “what is the number one issue?” We took a vote, and determined to focus on lack of resources as that was the issue that seemed to be underlying all the others. Our next step was to develop a project to highlight this issue and provide everyone the opportunity to participate to bring about change.

Throughout the past three years, Lift maintained its partnerships through addressing specific, acknowledged, and shared needs (Dobard, 2020). The aim was to concentrate on the specific without disregarding the complex and interconnected (Patel, 2016) issues surrounding the community, university and organizations’ needs—including lack of communal resources to combat unemployment, gun violence, strained community-police relations, the need to foster community and center care for self and others.

However, in March, we, like most of the country, were forced to move online—as instructors, college students, employees, high school students and staff. We experienced the unimaginable—the prospect of continuing or not in the midst of a global pandemic, one that brought questions about necessity, equity and access to systems of work and education, often with few answers.

Educational Equity and Access in a Time of Pandemic and Social Protest

While schooling largely moved online in March 2020, the issues of access to educational resources, tech-equity, and racial equity were substantially raised. One of our community partners, a Chicago public high school, is no exception. During the school closure in March and April, although constantly attempting to connect with the high school teachers and staff, we were not able to immediately schedule a meeting or hear from the students we serve. Communication difficulties with students, many related to access to technology, significantly impacted Lift programming during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Facing working from home and businesses shutting down, job disruptions were common for students from working class and low-income families (Issa, 2020; Lee, 2001; Sintema, 2020). Students experiencing poverty are more likely to have to share digital devices with their family members in order to join online classes than their wealthier peers (Chick, et al., 2020). News in April from *Chicago Sun Times* suggests 1 in 3 students within Chicago Public Schools (CPS) had no computers to join remote learning (Issa, 2020). Besides personal digital devices, it is also challenging for families in poverty to gain access to high-speed wireless internet services (Bushweller, 2020). CPS officials indicated that around 100,000 students lived in families without high-speed internet access (Chicago Tribune Editorial Board, 2020). Students from low income families found it difficult to access virtual classrooms (Graves, 2020; Sintema, 2020). While public schools are distributing computers and providing free meals for the students, it is crucial for university-based educators to emphasize systemic inequality of access to educational resources and support students experiencing poverty. What's more, according to a recent article in the *Chicago Tribune*, Chicago public school teachers have had *no contact* with at least 2,200 students, most of whom are Black and Brown students (Leone, 2020). The lack of contact and communication between Chicago schools and educators and students and families represents not only the lack of access to technology, but also issues of housing insecurity and employment. As we worked with our high school staff partners during the COVID closures, we witnessed this phenomenon as educators described their attempts to contact students and families, most of which were unsuccessful.

In addition, nationwide protests and unrest in June 2020 in the wake of George Floyd's murder by Minneapolis police turned this unprecedented time into a more turbulent situation. The issues of racial equity and social justice require educators' attention and demand responses. Prior to the COVID-19 and protesting, Lift worked on addressing community-police relations. The mentoring program for the alternative high school students includes doctoral students at the university who work as police officers. Facing the protests and continued disruptions due to the pandemic, Lift will continue to facilitate work with the students we serve, listen to their voices and needs, and explore the root causes and solutions for racial equity.

Reflections on Challenges and Successes

With any change, and certainly with a monumental crisis of disruption, the impulse is to act, and to support to those carrying the brunt of the crisis. In this case, we were faced with the dual challenges of physical separation (we could no longer visit the school or plan the retreat—there would be no young women’s retreat at all) and a break in consistent communication with the high school students. We paused to consider our own response to the situation (what do we do, if anything, and how do we go about doing it?). We had difficult conversations with much unknown (we couldn’t predict what was to come, we didn’t know where some of the high school students were or how to reach them, we didn’t know that we’d be forced to continue to try to carry on our work remotely for the foreseeable future).

But among all the challenges were also signs of growth and success. We were able to stay in contact with the high school staff members we had been working with, to check in with them and get updates regarding their experiences as well as the high school students’ experiences. We were able to maintain communication and meet with several College of Education student participants—even though they had left campus to shelter-in-place with family around the city and country. And we were able to provide a space for all to debrief, an invitation to share experiences, albeit virtually. This pandemic has shown many the scope and magnitude of the justice work that remains in this society. It has shown us that this work can carry on despite difficulties, but that it requires patience, resourcefulness and clarity (Dobard, 2020).

The Challenges

Once we realized we would no longer be able to visit the high school, that state, university, and partner organization COVID protocols meant we would not be able to host a young women’s retreat, and that even our university-based teams could no longer meet in person, next steps weren’t entirely clear. In grappling with the unknowns of COVID-19 and the diminishing ability to be out in the world, we were forced to ask questions of ourselves and our work. What could we do? What do Lift participants need to know? What do the students and staff of the high school need, if anything? How could we be partners and collaborators in the midst of so much chaos? We communicated with Lift participants, let them know that the retreat was canceled and that we would have to suspend our visits to the high school for the foreseeable future. As schools, businesses and organizations closed, students and communities were often left in the dark. How would schools ensure students had

access to technology, to food and other school-based services like counseling? Plans were devised and the CPS provided food and other resources to students. But when we contacted members of the high school staff, we found that they were scrambling—with little success at first—to locate students to make sure they were okay and could continue their studies.

And what about Lift? What does it mean to have the center of your work as a program wholly ruptured? It means you dig. It means you regroup and question and communicate. It means you find a way forward.

These challenges also encouraged of us to think about not only the future of Lift, but the future of education, newly apparent inequity in resources, and the well-being of the young mothers and the alternative high school students and staff. And these COVID-related challenges raised still more questions, such as how to maintain consistent contact with the community and high school students and staff, many of whom were struggling with unemployment, child and family care, and struggling to maintain secure housing.

The Successes

Although the social distancing guidelines impeded Lift programming, the COVID-19 crisis also brought new opportunities for creativity, mutual care, and carrying on the community-based justice work for the Lift team and participants. Our achievements in response to the pandemic can be characterized in three ways: (1) continuous attempts to support the community we serve, (2) stay in solidarity with our Lift participants (mostly university students and alumni), as well as (3) sharpen our focus on research- and advocacy-based opportunities within the Lift research team.

Even with school visits and in-person interactions impossible, we never stopped providing support. When direct outreach to most high school students became nearly impossible—some had to assume primary child care responsibilities, some had to seek additional jobs to support laid-off family members, some lacked computers or reliable internet access—we pivoted to focus on supporting the people who support them. We checked in and offered our help, shared resources, discussed evolving mandates coming from the governor, the mayor, and Chicago Public Schools, how we were (and weren't) balancing work and family responsibilities, and shared technology hacks, in biweekly Zoom meetings with high school teachers and staff. We maintained connection through an unpredictable time in these virtual meetings. We lifted each others' spirits, lessened anxiety, and tried to stay focused

on the little things we could do to support each other and continue the work. We connected and created space for alternative school students and teachers to share their concerns. During our debrief with one high school student, we were glad to learn that she enjoyed online learning, was able to finish her schoolwork, and was eager to join more virtual events while sheltering in place.

In addition to persisting in providing support to the community we serve, we also displayed true collaboration and remained in solidarity with our Lift program participants. We conducted exit interviews with program participants as a way to evaluate our work and to collect suggestions for further development. These exit interviews provided Lift participants a safe place to debrief their experiences and share their thoughts. In these interviews, our student participants expressed their passion and commitment to social justice work and appreciated the Lift program providing them an unforgettable experience to practice leadership and develop teamwork skills. And even some Lift participants who had not been able to physically visit the high school or meet in the community due to scheduling conflicts before COVID-19 had great experiences joining virtual meetings and interacting with the teachers and students we served when the Lift program transitioned to an online format. The resilience of the Lift team and the contribution of Lift participants held our community together while maintaining physical distance.

Another achievement during the pandemic was a shift in focus among the Lift research team. Besides conducting services and debriefing remotely, we were able to further emphasize and develop our advocacy- and research-based work during the quarantine. While our Young Women's group was not able to host its campus retreat, the team made good use of social media and email communication. We encouraged volunteers to follow the non-profit partner's website and kept them posted with opportunities where they could help, such as making a small donation or joining the clothing drive virtually. Through the advocacy-based service, volunteers developed a comprehensive understanding of our non-profit partners and thought deeply about the root problems and current needs of our community partners. Meanwhile, the online environment provided the Lift team an opportunity to focus on research. During the quarantine, we input and organized quantitative data from pre- and post-surveys of participants, collected and analyzed qualitative data, and created a project manual as a reflection of our project.

We feel gratified with these successes. Despite school, community partner, and university closings, we were able to support the communities we

serve, stay in solidarity with program participants, and move forward with research- and advocacy-based work. However, our experiences highlight the ways that COVID-19 significantly exacerbated existing educational inequalities, especially amplifying systemic problems with technology use and access. Moving forward, Lift is determined to remain in contact with its community partners and provide support when and where it is needed.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The COVID-19 pandemic and social unrest have highlighted the steep and unparalleled contrasts rooted in racial and economic disparities. As we move forward, we keep in mind the lives impacted, the effects of the traumas exposed and experienced during this unprecedented situation. Keeping an eye on social, technological, and educational inequities, Lift's work, its purpose, comes into sharp focus—it deepens the mission and spurs the collective imagination of Lift participants and the Lift research team. One Lift participant, during one of our debriefing Zoom sessions, asked what do we do about the disparities, what is our role (individual and collective) in addressing them? We take these concerns to heart. We are in the midst of regrouping, of developing plans for what will inevitably be a contentious and equally socially distant fall.

In response to the inevitable changes wrought by the pandemic, the Lift program will continue to reach out to partner organizations, practice true collaboration with volunteer participants, as well as focus on research-based and advocacy-based approaches to develop our social justice work. By reflecting on challenges and successes we experienced while carrying on community-based justice work during the COVID-19 pandemic, this article highlights the importance of exploring alternative ways to continue to work for social justice even in times of shelter-in-place, school and university closures, and social distancing. Issues of educational inequity, lack of access to educational opportunities and technology, and racial injustice command the attention of all educators, especially those committed to Catholic principles of social justice. Lift as You Climb is a glimpse of, in its particularity, the sharp awakening of social justice educators and counselors to the true impact and power of their work, to the need for community and solidarity in times of crisis. It is a glimpse of what was done and a vision of what could be.

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